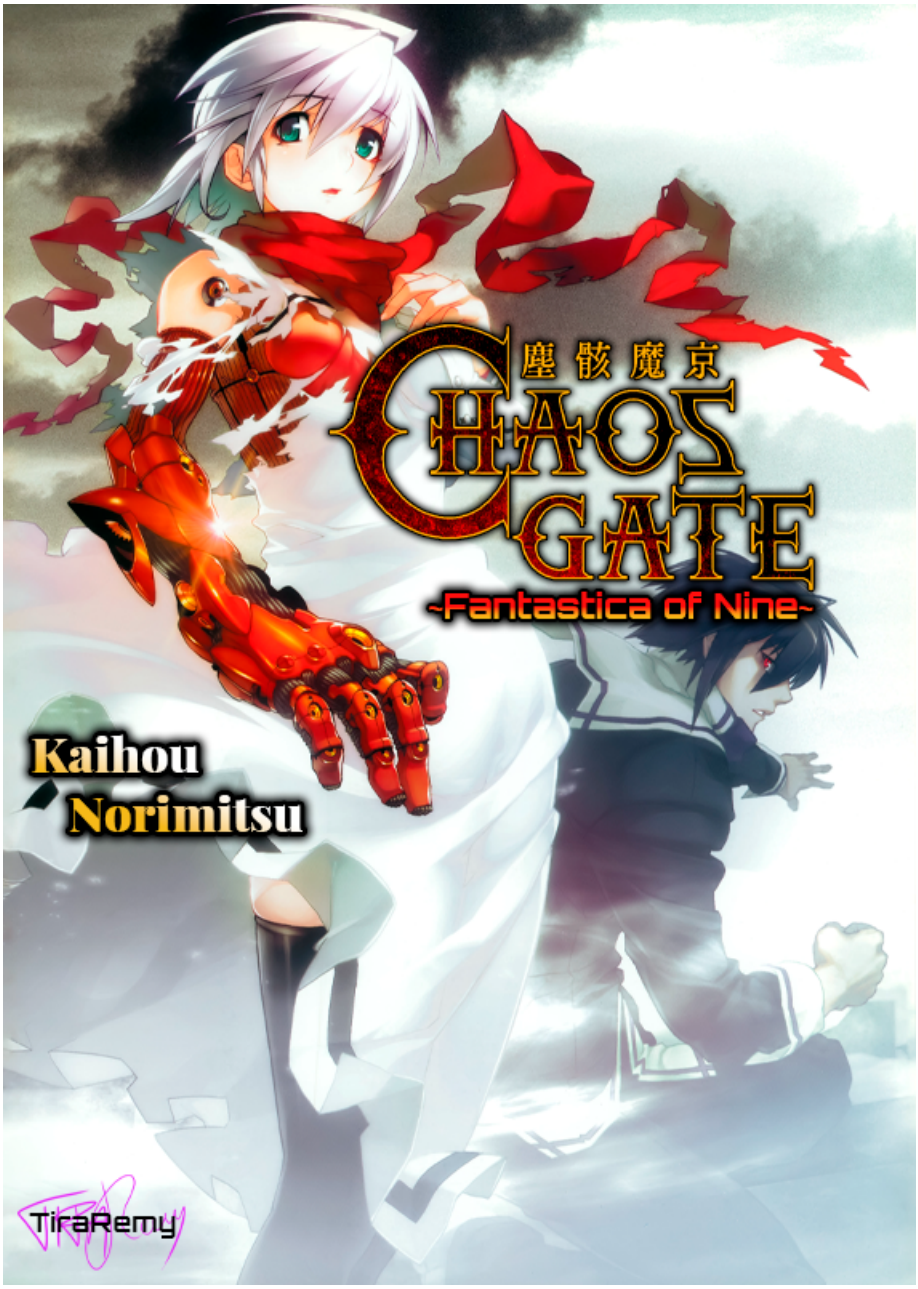
塵骸魔京
CHAOS GATE
~Fantastica of Nine~
Kaihou Norimitsu
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Jingai Makyou

~ Fantastica of Nine ~

Volume 1

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Synopsis

The boy she likes doesn't have a heart. Makimoto Misae, a class representative who cherishes nothing more than a quiet, ordinary high school life, has fallen for her classmate—Kumon Katsuki. Expressionless, unshakably calm, and completely oblivious to the mood around him, he simply says whatever comes to mind.

Just as the two begin to inch closer, awkwardly but earnestly confirming their feelings, the hidden darkness of Saimatsu City begins to stir.

Non-human beings lurking in the shadows, and the organization known as "Strass" that fights them, drag the pair toward a cruel fate neither of them could have imagined…

The first volume of the novel adaptation of Nitroplus's acclaimed game arrives at last!

Fantastica of Nine
ファンタスティカ・オブ・ナイン
Yoroshiku.
ヨロシク。

座骸魔京
CHAOS GATE
-Fantastica of Nine-

"Nine for mortal men doomed to die."

——"The Lord of the Rings", J.R.R. Tolkien

Prologue

"Blood Crystal!"

With the man's shout, a black shadow descended from the sky. In the shopping district where the sun was still shining brightly, only that one spot became dim and lusterless, as if it had been cut out. The world lost its original color, as if time itself had stopped.

In this black-and-white space, only one color remained.

It was a suit of armor emitting a crimson radiance—the very proof of the man's blood being drained dry.

The man struck a pose he had repeated dozens, hundreds of times, and shouted:

"Galactic Detective Beowulf...!"

—Galactic Detective Beowulf completed his transformation in a mere nanosecond.

"...HAS ARRIVED!"

Hrunting, the metallic lifeform coexisting within the body of Oozora Kakeru, decomposed the molecules of his physical body and reconstructed them into a combat form.

Muscle fibers were composed of shape-memory polymers; a neural network woven from reinforced wire gave his reflex speeds a leap in performance; and finally, the iron within his very lifeblood was summoned and refined, forging a suit of bio-armor that encased his skin in a cold, metallic embrace, thereby completing Beowulf's transformation.

Thus...

Beneath the man's head armor, there were no facial features left. All that remained was a brain directly fused with liquid metal.

The man had no teeth to clench, nor did he have pupils that could shed tears.

His opponent was a space-polluting lifeform variant, code-named: Grendel 12.

As a Galactic Detective, the man had a duty to fight it.

Even if the opponent was once a human being.

Even if they had once been the only person to connect with this lonely man's heart.

"Fuyu-nee...?"

Makimoto Misae called out to her older sister, Fuyuko.

Misae did not know why her parents had chosen that name for her sister. Her mother had passed away when Misae was still very young, so she had no memories of her; as for her father, she hadn't seen him in a long time and never wanted to again, because she hated the father who used to hit her sister.

The word "winter" (Fuyu) usually brings to mind something cold and harsh, but her sister was nothing like that. She was always the one shielding Misae from the harshness of the world.

Misae had never once seen her sister look sad.

Her sister always laughed heartily, got fired up when she was angry, looked completely satisfied when praised, and would scold herself whenever she felt she hadn't done well enough.

"Fuyu-nee... Time to eat."

When Misae opened the sliding door, she immediately knew why there was no response: today was Friday.

The TV was broadcasting Galactic Detective Beowulf.

A cosmic warrior clad in shining armor.

The plot had some depth to it, but Misae couldn't quite understand the reasoning yet, so the first half of the episodes were very boring to

her.

But on the TV, he had already transformed into his hero form and was fighting "Grendel" in the "Deep Space."

Beowulf in battle was very cool—strong and brimming with a sense of justice; to Misae, he was like the incarnation of her sister.

"Galaxy Sword!"

After the beam sword flashed, "Grendel" exploded.

"Grendel" slowly turned back into its original creature. Misae remembered it was a lion in the previous episode. She wondered what it would be this time?

Just then, the TV was turned off.

It was her sister who did it. It took Misae a moment to react.

(What's wrong?)

But she did not say these words out loud.

Because she saw that her sister, who had turned her head, was shedding tears. Her sister clearly wore her usual strong smile, yet she was crying.

At a loss, Misae found herself crying too.

"Oh my, why are you crying?"

Her sister gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I... I brought the food."

This was the most effort Misae could manage.

Her hands holding the tray began to feel numb; on it were white rice, fried eggs, and grilled fish, all made by her own hands.

"Wow! It looks delicious!"

"Mm, mm."

"Don't make that face, I'm really okay!"

"Really?"

Misae asked with a worried expression.

"Really. I just suddenly felt that being on the side of justice is

sometimes... very painful."

Fuyuko placed her hand on her chest and spoke while looking straight ahead.

"Does Big Sister have painful times too?"

"Of course I do."

"Eh?"

Young Misae couldn't believe her ears; she had never imagined her sister being sad.

"When times are painful, you have to clench your fists like this, and then look up at the sky."

These were the words from the show's ending theme that would have played if the TV hadn't been turned off.

"Isn't the sky so blue and magnificent? Just by looking at a sky like that, your spirit will keep surging forth."

"Yes... I understand."

Misae nodded vigorously and clenched her fists.

In her heart, she thought that one day she would also become a Warrior of Justice just like her sister.

That was a memory from many years ago.

An innocent and childish wish, yet an unforgettable one.

Chapter One

- 1 -

On the way to school in the morning.

Makimoto Misae let out a wide yawn; although she was usually an early riser, she had stayed up far too late last night.

She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the cold morning air to help clear her mind.

She really loved this time of the morning.

Strolling along the quiet streets, watching the number of students wearing the same uniform as herself gradually increase—among them were faces she'd never seen before, and faces she recognized—thinking about how she too was just one of many students, she felt a slight sense of relief.

Makimoto really liked the word "ordinary."

Even if she lacked a grand direction in life like most people, as long as she could live ordinary days and have ordinary happiness, it would surely be a wonderful life.

As she was thinking that, the flow of the crowd suddenly shifted. Students began walking in the opposite direction. Makimoto stopped in her tracks, straining her ears to catch the fragmented conversations drifting toward her.

—It looks like you can't go through up ahead.

—Was there an accident?

—I think the police are here.

She didn't want to hear any more.

"The serial killings in Saimatsu City."

"The Cannibal."

Although the case hadn't been heavily reported in other cities, Makimoto knew the number of victims and the scale of it were quite significant.

Just as she turned around to head back the way she came...

"Ah."

Her shoulder bumped into someone.

"I am so sorry."

Makimoto hurriedly bowed her head to apologize.

But the person laughed with a gentle voice and said:

"I'm the one who should apologize, because I was in a rush."

A girl with long black hair swayed the black parasol in her hand, a hint of a smile in her eyes.

"Hello, Makimoto-san. It's been a long time."

"He-hello."

Who was she? She looked familiar, but Makimoto couldn't quite place her.

"What's wrong? You look a bit pale..."

"It's nothing, I just saw an accident back there..."

"Three people passed away."

The parasol spun continuously in her hand, the shadow perfectly veiling her face so her expression remained hidden.

"Those people who passed away once lived in this world."

"Yes."

"For example, there are people who live ordinary lives, and then there are those who die so suddenly. Comparing the two, it feels a bit unfair... when I think about that, I can't help but feel sad."

"How could it be unfair?"

The girl's gentle voice carried a trace of strong will.

"That is also life."

"Eh?"

"Though the lengths vary, for every person, it is equally a life lived only once. Don't you think that is fair?"

A life—a life lived only once.

"That sounds like something Mineyuki-kun would say."

Just as the image of her classmate surfaced in Makimoto's mind, a shout came from behind her.

"Morning, Makimoto!"

The person calling out to her wore a crumpled uniform and a knit beanie, with a flippant smile on his face. No matter how you looked at him, he seemed like a delinquent—and he was very tall, too.

"Mineyuki-kun, good morning."

Mineyuki Ryou—though he was the heir to a temple, he had publicly announced his aspiration to become a musician.

"Man, it's a killer season to soak in some shuukyou (pleasantness of autumn)."

"Shuukyou⊕? Like a temple?"

⊕In Japanese, "pleasantness of autumn" (秋興 shuukyou) is a homophone for "religion" (宗教 shuukyou).

"Nah, it's the character for ‘Autumn’ plus ‘Pleasantness.’ It means appreciating the unique things of the season."

Perhaps because he was raised in a temple, Mineyuki tended to pepper his speech with difficult vocabulary whenever he opened his mouth.

"Based on my observations, your current activity is limited to visual surveillance of women in long coats."

The one speaking was Kumon Katsuki.

"Of course! How can admiring a beauty in a long coat not be called shuukyou!"

"Good morning, Kumon-kun."

"Good morning, Makimoto-san. However, whether it can be called ‘morning’ depends on the definition of ‘early.’ If we use sunrise as the reference point, it is indeed morning, but the current time is later than the usual commute. If we do not pick up the pace, we are in danger of being late."

In Makimoto's impression, Kumon Katsuki was a somewhat difficult-to-understand, serious, and blunt person—though she had only recently realized he definitely wasn't a bad guy.

"By the way, it seems this road is blocked."

"Why? Don't tell me... it's that incident again?"

"Incident?"

"Haven't you heard, Kumon-kun?"

"I have not."

"The killings that have been happening frequently around here lately."

"Hmm?"

"I heard every body has signs of being gnawed on."

"St-stop it."

"Although it sounds quite interesting, it is not enough to become a reason for being late or skipping class."

"Yeah, let's take a detour this way then."

"Right, let's hurry."

"Yes, that is more logical."

"Let's go!"

The three of them immediately began sprinting toward the school.

Shortly after they started running, a thought suddenly occurred to Makimoto.

They really were a strange combination.

Mineyuki-kun looked unique on the outside, but he was actually quite ordinary at his core... to put it simply, he was a man of common sense.

Kumon-kun looked serious on the outside... but he was actually incredibly weird.

And as for me...

"What's wrong, Makimoto? Can't keep up?"

Mineyuki turned his head to ask.

"There are five minutes and thirty seconds left until the preparatory bell rings. There is still room to breathe."

"It's nothing, I was just thinking about something."

"I, for one, am interested in hearing what you were thinking just now."

"I was just thinking about what ‘ordinary’ means, that's all."

After Makimoto finished speaking, she ran forward again. Her body grew warm as she ran, while the autumn wind blowing against her face remained cold.

But she wasn't the only one feeling it; all three of them were the same.

She realized she was smiling.

- 2 -

Kaitou Academy is a Catholic religious school founded by an Italian priest, and even today, many Italian teachers and priests still teach here.

"Tch, he's already there."

Mineyuki said, glaring at the school gate with resentment.

The person standing at the school gate was Father Mercuriali, nicknamed "The Strongest" Mer. With his long black hair, charismatic smile, and the general admiration people held for the priesthood, he was quite popular among the female students.

"Mineyuki, wait. The probability of success is..."

Before Kumon could even reach out to stop him, Mineyuki had already leaped forward.

"Get out of my way, you Jesus-freak!!"

Mineyuki launched a kick in mid-air.

This was already the third time this month they had been at each other's throats.

However, it was also Mineyuki's third defeat.

Mercuriali took a small step back to dodge Mineyuki's attack, then slammed his elbow hard down onto Mineyuki's shin.

Kumon's face contorted slightly; it looked painful just watching it. Every time Kumon saw this scene, he couldn't help but feel that the techniques Mercuriali used seemed exceptionally suited for actual combat. Just how many life-and-death situations would one have to experience to possess such skill?

"Ugh!"

Mineyuki let out a scream of pain after crashing to the ground.

"Whoa, are you okay?"

Makimoto stepped forward to show her concern, but Mineyuki

simply gritted his teeth and shook his head to indicate he was fine.

"Get inside quickly, or you'll be late."

Mercuriali warned Makimoto and Kumon with his magnetic voice. As if pushed by that voice, the two of them bowed to him as they passed through the school gate.

"You aren't late yet, but it would be best to arrive a bit earlier from now on."

"Um... what about Mineyuki-kun...?"

"Him...? I think it is necessary to give him some proper guidance."

Father Mercuriali said this with a smile. Facing that face, which commanded respect without even needing to show anger, Makimoto could only nod slowly.

The two of them crossed the school courtyard and headed toward their classroom.

Right then, Kumon spoke up.

"Why does Mineyuki view Father Mercuriali as an archenemy?"

"Hmm... I think he said that since he's a Buddhist, he can't accept Christianity..."

"But I recall that during the Second Vatican Council, John XXIII extended goodwill toward all religious faiths in the world, and most Buddhists in Japan accepted it. Is Mineyuki part of a radical minority?"

"Well... I don't think it's quite like that. How should I put it..."

Makimoto didn't know how to express it properly and was speechless for a moment.

"Then what is the reason?"

Makimoto looked at Kumon's face; he still wore that serious expression, and his gaze felt like a pressurized search for an answer directed right at her.

"I'm sorry, I'm not really sure either."

As soon as she finished speaking, Makimoto hurried into the

classroom and sat down, but the throbbing in her heart wouldn't calm down for a long while.

- 3 -

"Good morning, everyone."

"Ah, Class Rep, good morning."

Makimoto exchanged greetings with the other female students.

Makimoto Misae gave off the impression of being serious and responsible in this class—the typical candidate for Class Representative.

This was because, after much trial and error, she had discovered that this role was the most "ordinary" for her.

Makimoto knew very little about the trends or slang popular among the girls, but it wasn't because she disliked them; she simply didn't have the time to learn about them.

That being the case, as the "Class Rep," it was perfectly fine even if she didn't possess that knowledge.

"So Maki doesn't watch much TV after all."

"Is your family really strict, Class Rep?"

"Not really, but hearing you guys talk about it, the plot sounds quite interesting."

It wasn't just mere politeness; Makimoto really did find the TV drama plots her classmates talked about interesting. And the way their faces lit up as they explained them fascinated her just as much. She could see how absorbed they were in the stories, and the faint pride they took in knowing them. Maybe... this is what peace looks like.

That was why Makimoto enjoyed listening to them discuss the plots of dramas she had never seen.

"Hey, Makimoto."

During lunch break, a gruff voice rang out, callously addressing Makimoto by her surname. As soon as the female students heard it, they kept a respectful distance.

"What is it, Mineyuki-kun?"

"I've got something to talk to you about. Come up to the rooftop for a bit."

The surrounding girls all looked worried, trying to signal her with their eyes not to go.

"What happened now?"

"You'll see when we get there."

"You're such a pain... sure, let's go."

Makimoto packed up her lunch, waved to her friends to show them they needn't worry, and followed Mineyuki out of the classroom.

In this chilly season, there were very few people who would deliberately go up to the rooftop to eat lunch—but someone had already gotten there first.

That person was Kumon Katsuki, who was silently enjoying a sandwich bought from the school cafeteria.

Mineyuki went over and sat down beside him.

"When you said you had something to talk about, did you mean something regarding Kumon-kun?"

"Yeah, because it seems this idiot caused you some trouble."

"Eh, trouble?"

"Since Makimoto-san ran off in the middle of our conversation this morning, I consulted Mineyuki what that signified. He concluded that it was a sign of displeasure. Since it was not my intention to cause you any feelings of unpleasantness, I wished to apologize."

"Uh, th-that..."

"Did I, in fact, cause you to feel unpleasant?"

Kumon's direct gaze made Makimoto's heart begin to race.

"I told you, you can't be so blunt, you blockhead!"

Mineyuki gave Kumon a hard smack.

"But I was merely inquiring."

"That's called an interrogation."

"In other words, did my behavior just now appear as though I were forcibly demanding an answer?"

"Exactly!"

"But I had no such intention."

Mineyuki shrugged and let out a sigh.

"Makimoto, as you can see, this guy is just like this. But he definitely bears no ill will—that much I can guarantee."

"Precisely. I bear no ill will."

"Right... okay."

Makimoto was starting to understand Kumon's behavior a little; the reason he stared at her didn't actually have any hidden meaning.

Yet, the throbbing in her chest refused to settle down.

"I was just a bit startled, so don't take it to heart."

"I see. I shall not take it to heart."

"You better take it to heart!"

"I have been given two contradictory commands simultaneously. Which one should I follow...?"

Seeing the look of serious distress on Kumon's face, Makimoto couldn't help but let out a smile.

- 4 -

Makimoto's conversations with Kumon and Mineyuki had initially

begun out of her desire to fulfill her duties as Class Representative.

Mineyuki was the class mood-maker, but he was also a troublemaker, so it was only natural that he became a target of the Class Rep's attention.

And while Kumon didn't cause any overt problems and didn't seem like the type to do anything bad in Makimoto's eyes, for some reason, the female students' evaluation of him was quite poor; she often heard stories about him making someone cry again, or heard other bad-mouthing directed at him.

After Makimoto stepped in as a mediator a few times, Kumon naturally fell under the Class Rep's jurisdiction as well.

Putting aside Mineyuki's eccentric way of doing things, she simply couldn't imagine Kumon causing trouble; while he was certainly a bit odd, he didn't seem like the type to trigger any major issues.

—It's no wonder, though.

Those direct eyes and his unembellished way of speaking—when those two traits combined, it wouldn't be strange for a girl or two to get the wrong idea.

During the afternoon classes, Makimoto spent her time observing Kumon.

Surprisingly, Kumon wasn't quite as serious as she had imagined.

He listened intently to Kogure-sensei's lecture during the fifth period, but as soon as the sixth period arrived, he began to slack off as if he were a different person.

One moment he was spacing out with his head propped in his hand, the next he was hiding a novel behind his textbook, and finally, he was daydreaming or dozing off quite openly.

However, his behavior wasn't hard to understand, because Kogure-sensei really wasn't very good at teaching.

"Kumon, you answer the next question."

Having noticed Kumon dozing off, an irritated Kogure-sensei called on him to answer.

(Page twelve, question seven.)

Mineyuki, sitting behind him, timely signaled the answer to bail him out.

"‘He lost his heart.’"

He answered the question perfectly; from a teacher's standpoint, Kogure-sensei had no choice but to praise him, though clearly against his will.

...So he really is the type who just does whatever he wants.

Makimoto reached this conclusion.

"Makimoto, you answer the next one."

"Ye-yes, uh..."

She had been watching Kumon the whole time, so she couldn't react right away.

"Question nine, Makimoto. What's the matter? It's unlike you to space out."

Kogure-sensei's tone sounded a bit sour; it seemed he was taking his irritation out on Makimoto.

"Sorry. The answer is ‘Her heart was something she received from her older brother.’"

"Good. Make sure you pay attention in class."

Kogure-sensei glanced toward Kumon, but he was back to staring blankly out the window.

- 5 -

"Makimoto-san."

"Eh? What's up?"

As school was letting out, Kumon called out to Makimoto.

"I have something I wish to discuss with you."

"Then let's walk home together."

"Alright."

"Great, let's get going then."

"Mineyuki, I do not recall inviting you to join us."

"Consider it a ‘forced’ blessing; a good deed is still a good deed, no matter who pushed you into it!⊕"

⊕The original proverb is 「牛にひかれて善光寺参り」— meaning that even if you are guided toward a good deed by chance or against your initial will, it is still a virtuous act.

"Don't let it bother you. There's no logic to what this guy says, but I think this is just his way of showing kindness."

"Better than the stuff you blurt out without a thought."

"Is that so? Then first, please provide the concrete evidence and statistical data that can prove that statement..."

"Alright, alright, let's just go."

Makimoto nodded, waved goodbye to the other girls, and walked out of the classroom.

"What I wanted to discuss was a continuation of our unfinished conversation from this morning."

"This morning? You mean whether Mineyuki-kun is part of a radical minority?"

"Why am I getting dragged into this again!?"

"No, even earlier than that."

"Hmm... what did I say again?"

"Didn't you say you were contemplating what exactly it means to be ‘ordinary’?"

Makimoto thought back to the morning. She really had said something like that.

"I spent the entire afternoon pondering that question."

"Huh?"

"I said, I spent the entire afternoon pondering that question."

"No, I didn't mean that—I meant, you spent your classes thinking about that?"

"It wasn't a continuous effort; rather, it would be more accurate to say I devoted the majority of my time to the thought."

"I... I see—"

"I would like to share my conclusion with Makimoto-san, if you are interested."

"S-sure, I'd like to hear it."

"You'd better change your mind. Listening to this guy talk is no different from listening to Buddhist sutras."

"It is difficult to imagine such words coming from the mouth of a monk."

"I'm a musician!"

"Anyway... if one were to define what an ‘ordinary’ human is, it would require a multivariate analysis. Aside from finding a way to filter out the variables and quantifying them, one must once again define ‘ordinariness’ within those values..."

"Namu Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu..."

"Mineyuki, why are you interfering? Besides, isn't your family from the Shingon⊕ sect?"

⊕Another name for Esoteric Buddhism.

"Everything you say sounds like a damn funeral chant. Explain it in a way that's easy to understand. Right, Makimoto?"

"Sorry, but what you're saying really is a little difficult to understand."

"Hm, very well... First, to define ordinariness, we can use numerical values for comparison."

"Like averages?"

"Not just that. There are the maximum, the median, the margin of error, and so on; various units of measurement must be used depending on the context. But all of those require numerical data to have meaning, and a human's value cannot possibly be expressed by a

single number."

"Not just one number, huh... so like the stat values in an RPG?"

"Something like that. However, it goes without saying that how to categorize and quantify each ability is the primary problem. Furthermore, if one wishes to find the ‘average’ and ‘error’ of multiple values, one must employ highly advanced mathematics and exploratory factor analysis for measurement."

"...Seriously? You spent the whole afternoon thinking about something that useless?"

"No, it's not like that. I think Kumon-kun is quite amazing."

"I consider this nothing more than simple logical thinking. But what is the basis for your ‘amazing’ evaluation, Makimoto-san?"

Kumon looked straight at Makimoto with those honest, direct eyes of his.

"I told you, don't look at people like that. It's scary."

"But I was told that when speaking with someone, one must look them in the eye..."

"That means to look at them, not to glare at them."

"Hmm... that is a difficult distinction to make."

"You'll just have to figure it out for yourself."

Watching Kumon sink into deep thought over the problem, Makimoto felt strangely happy.

She felt like she understood Kumon Katsuki a little better now.

He was just... incredibly awkward. That's why he stood out so much in class and became a topic of gossip among the girls.

But the most admirable thing was that he didn't care at all about how un-ordinary that made him.

"So, you want to know what ‘ordinary’ is?"

"Yeah. What's your take, Mineyuki-kun?"

"This is how I see it. The word ‘ordinary’ literally means that which is ‘universally prevalent’⊕. In other words, from the sky above

to the depths below, anything that exists in this world can be called ordinary—like water or air."

⊕The original phrase is 「普く通じる」— literally "to be universally connected," extended to mean "present throughout all things."

"But there is no water or air in outer space."

"Exactly. Such things naturally change depending on the situation. In other words, it is a realm that we common folk can't possibly reach."

"Does that mean... there's really no such thing as an ‘ordinary’ person?"

"That's exactly it. So there's no need to worry so much about whether you're ordinary or not."

"I feel the same way."

"No, you should worry about it more."

"Hmm, but I am already trying my best."

"I know."

"Have you two known each other for a long time?"

"Yeah, this guy and Megumi are my childhood friends."

"Megumi?"

"My younger sister. She returns today."

"What did you say!?"

Mineyuki suddenly let out a shout so loud that Makimoto reflexively covered her ears.

"I just said that my sister, who has been studying abroad in England, returns today. Is there a problem?"

...I take it back. I really don't understand Kumon-kun at all.

"You idiot! How could you not tell me something that important sooner!?"

"Because you didn't ask."

"You heartless jerk... Where are you meeting her? The airport?"

"No, at home."

"...We're running!"

"Eh? Wait!"

Though Makimoto didn't quite understand the situation, seeing the two of them start to bolt, she instinctively chased after them.

The dormitory rules allowed for a late return once a week. Though she rarely took advantage of it, she figured doing it once in a while was fine, right? As she ran, Makimoto pulled out her phone and began to dial a number.

- 6 -

They slipped off the main road into a narrow alley, then climbed a slope. After passing along a street lined on both sides with ginkgo trees, the three of them came to a stop.

"Is this Kumon-kun's house?"

Towering beneath the setting sun was an old-style Western manor, complete with a clock tower rising above it.

"No, I am merely renting a room here."

"Ah, I see."

"Manager-san, I'm back."

"Welcome home."

A woman wearing glasses was sweeping in front of the gate. Her clothes were a bit plain, but her figure was excellent—her full chest and slender waist were especially eye-catching.

...I lost.

That thought surfaced in my mind before I could stop it.

"He-hello, my name is Makimoto, I'm Kumon-kun's classmate..."

"Oh my, nice to meet you."

A gentle, warm smile appeared on the Manager-san's face.

The moment she saw that smile, Makimoto suddenly burst into tears.

—Eh? Why am I crying?

Makimoto snapped back to herself and stopped the tears. For some reason, her chest was filled with a deep sense of nostalgia.

Right—her mother, who had passed away when she was little. She only knew her mother's face from photographs, and this woman didn't resemble her at all. Even so, she couldn't help but overlap the two figures in her mind.

"Well then, I'll head back to my room."

"Hello, excuse the intrusion."

After watching the two boys walk into the boarding house...

"Wah!"

Something soft wrapped around Makimoto. Her face instantly turned red—she was being tightly hugged by the Manager-san.

Her body had no strength to struggle, and what followed was a warmth she had long forgotten—the warmth of being embraced by someone.

"Um, uh..."

Before she could protest, the Manager-san released her.

"It's cold outside, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"That won't do; you're a girl, you must be careful not to catch a cold."

That beautiful smile was too unfair.

It was the kind of motherly smile that made every word vanish, like magic.

"Y-you're right."

Makimoto forced a stiff smile, then retied the ribbon of her uniform.

"Kumon's room is on the second floor."

"Okay, excuse me."

Then, Makimoto pushed open the somewhat aged main door.

- 7 -

As soon as she reached the second floor, Makimoto immediately knew where Kumon's room was, because she could hear voices chatting and laughing.

"Um, good afternoon, everyone."

She gathered her courage and stepped into the room.

"Hmm, it's Makimoto-san, this is bad."

Bad?

Makimoto couldn't help but wonder if she had misheard; as she thought... it really wasn't a good idea to intrude so suddenly. It's better not to have an outsider around when siblings who haven't seen each other in a long time reunite. But Mineyuki-kun was here too, so...

"Makimoto, you really ought to be angry."

Mineyuki said impatiently.

"Eh?"

"This guy must be saying the room is too cramped."

"Correct. This room becomes excessively narrow when a fourth person enters; let us change locations."

"...Onii-san, you haven't changed one bit."

Only after hearing the sigh did Makimoto notice the presence of the young girl.

At the same time, the short-haired girl met her gaze.

The girl stared straight at Makimoto without looking away.

"My name is Kumon Megumi. I'm sure my brother has caused you a lot of trouble, but he never means any harm, so please..."

"Let us hurry and change locations; it is too cramped in here."

Six eyes all turned toward Kumon.

No one moved.

"What is the matter? We cannot go out if you stay sitting still."

The three of them sighed at the same time and exchanged glances.

"That's true."

"Exactly."

"Let's go out."

The four of them filed out of Kumon's room.

- 8 -

"Let's go out to the balcony. But it'll be a little cold."

"I will go get our coats."

The way Megumi jogged off was so cute that Makimoto couldn't take her eyes off her for a moment.

Just as Megumi returned and the group stepped onto the balcony...

"Everyone, the tea is ready."

The Manager-san appeared as if she had timed it perfectly.

On the tray were four teacups, a freshly baked pie, and a teapot covered with a cloth.

"Thanks for the treat."

Kumon answered without hesitation, his face expressionless.

"Th-thank you for the treat."

"Thank you."

"Thank you."

The other three reacted a beat slower.

"Please, enjoy."

As the Manager-san spoke, she poured black tea into the cups, and the cool autumn air immediately filled with a rich tea aroma.

"Um... won't you join us, Manager-san?"

"I have already eaten. I shall leave so you young people can enjoy yourselves."

There it was again—that unfair smile.

Kumon-kun, who lived here... how should I put it... was truly lucky.

"Alright, let's eat before it gets cold."

"I agree."

And so, the four of them said in unison:

"Itadakimasu."

Makimoto's fork barely touched the apple pie before it cut cleanly through. She lifted a piece and took a bite, and a shock she'd never felt before exploded in her mind.

Only now did she realize that a truly delicious pie wasn't just about the filling—the crust itself was incredible.

The natural flavor of butter and eggs spread slowly through her mouth, rich and fragrant.

...Looks like gaining weight is unavoidable.

The more she chewed, the better the crust tasted. Combined with the sweet-tart apple, and the warm breath escaping her mouth as she exhaled, even the temperature in her mouth became part of the pleasure.

"Hmm, I detect Kougyoku apples⊕. The fragrance is quite elegant. Furthermore, a moderate amount of cinnamon has been used, and..."

⊕A variety of Japanese apple with bright red skin and slightly tart flesh.

"Haha-fufu-hafu!"

Kumon, analyzing the food even while eating, stood in stark contrast to Mineyuki, who was devouring the apple pie like a glutton.

Then Makimoto looked toward Megumi.

"This is just too delicious..."

"You're absolutely right."

The two girls exchanged looks of helpless resignation.

Simply put, one whole pie was cut into eight slices, so each person could have two.

Despite being made with plenty of high-quality butter and eggs, the pie was surprisingly light. Paired with apple tea, it was impossible not to keep taking bite after bite. But even so...

Two slices together still had way too many calories.

Even so, there are times when one cannot back down...

"Eh? You're not eating yours?"

Mineyuki, having finished his two slices at lightning speed, extended his devilish hand toward the next target.

At that moment, Megumi thrust her fork toward the pie with blinding speed.

"Ugh!"

If she had been even a second slower, Mineyuki's hand would definitely have gained a new hole.

"Oh my, so sorry."

The little devil wore an angelic smile.

"What about you, Makimoto?"

Kumon asked.

"Mm, I'm still going to eat mine."

Hidden within those words was Makimoto's unwavering resolve.

"I see..."

Kumon sounded genuinely disappointed.

Hearing emotion in Kumon's voice for once shook Makimoto a

little, but she still protected her second slice with her fork.

"Manager-san is amazing."

Makimoto couldn't help but praise her.

"I've never met anyone whose cooking surpasses hers."

"No, it's more than just that."

Not only the tea, but even the pie had been prepared at some unknown time. Maybe she had heard in advance that Kumon's little sister would be visiting today, but Mineyuki and Makimoto were completely unexpected guests.

And yet she had prepared enough for everyone without the slightest trouble.

...She is truly an unfathomable person.

This was the impression the Manager-san of Foredo Residence left on Makimoto Misae.

- 9 -

The plates was now completely empty, which meant that the moment of happiness and tension had come to an end.

"Alright, let me introduce you first. This is Katsuki's younger sister, Megumi-chan; she's worlds apart compared to her brother."

"I am Megumi, pleased to meet you."

Mineyuki's face suddenly twisted, while Megumi wore the same smile as before. She had probably kicked Mineyuki hard in the shin under the table.

But why was she angry?

Ah, I get it. Because he said something bad about Kumon-kun.

This feeling was nice... Makimoto couldn't help thinking so, maybe because the sister she'd been so proud of was no longer here.

"Next, this is our Class Representative, Makimoto-san."

"I am Makimoto Misae. Nice to meet you, Megumi-chan."

"Hello. Although my brother is quite hopeless, please take care of him."

After saying that, Megumi bowed deeply to Makimoto.

"I am sure there will be many sad and unpleasant things happening from now on, so I must ask for your utmost patience and understanding."

Makimoto suddenly felt a chill run down her spine. Megumi still wore her smile, but her voice sounded like she was reciting a eulogy... terrifying.

"Um... Kumon-kun and I aren't in ‘that kind of relationship’ like you're imagining. My being here is just a coincidence."

"Really?"

Megumi's voice instantly turned bright and cheerful, and she bloomed with a smile like a flower.

She must really love her brother.

"Makimoto-san."

"Mm? What is it?"

"Regarding ‘that kind of relationship’ you just mentioned, what relationship specifically are you referring to? Could you please explain it clearly?"

Everyone present heard a dull thud at that moment, but they all pretended not to notice—except for one person.

"Megumi, that hurts."

However, the culprit ignored his protest.

"My brother is just like this, so please be patient with him."

"Mm, pleased to meet you, Megumi-chan."

Makimoto immediately took a liking to the girl before her.

- 10 -

"What would everyone like for dinner?"

The moment they returned inside, they heard the Manager-san's voice.

"Ah, I'll be heading back soon."

"Is that so? Manager-san's cooking is absolute perfection, you know."

"But, I'd feel bad about it."

"Makimoto-san, there is no need for you to be modest."

"Why?"

Hearing Kumon's calm voice, Makimoto turned her head toward him.

"Manager-san frequently prepares excessive amounts of food. I'm

certain today will follow that pattern."

The gazes of Megumi, Mineyuki, and Makimoto all shifted back to Kumon.

"What is it?"

"Onii-san... would you mind repeating that?"

"I said, the meals Manager-san prepares every morning are frequently excessive, so I am always the one who handles the leftovers."

"Is that so... I see."

Beneath Megumi's stiff, mask-like smile was a will of pure steel.

"Sorry, I have something to do, so I'll head back first."

Mineyuki, sensing danger, spoke up.

"M-me too."

Makimoto immediately realized something was off as well.

"Oh my, you're all leaving already?"

Manager-san asked, still maintaining her ever-present smile.

"The apple pie was delicious. We'll be taking our leave now."

As soon as they said that, the two of them turned and left the room at once.

"Onii-san, I have a few things I would like to discuss with you..."

Megumi's voice came from behind them, carrying an indescribable sense of dread.

- 11 -

"Unbelievable. What a total brick-head."

Mineyuki practically fled from the boarding house, muttering nonstop under his breath.

From the looks of it, Manager-san must prepare breakfast for Kumon every single morning.

And she likely uses the excuse, "I accidentally made too much."

And Kumon believes her without a shadow of doubt, honestly accepting Manager-san's kindness.

"Kumon-kun is truly amazing."

"You talking about how he's got a skull made of reinforced concrete?"

"No... I think he's very confident in himself."

"I think that guy could stand to be a little more humble."

"No, what I mean is..."

Mineyuki chuckled and said:

"I get what you mean. After all, I've known that guy for a long time."

"I don't understand Kumon-kun at all."

"Confucius once said: ‘The gentleman seeks harmony but not uniformity; the petty person seeks uniformity but not harmony.’ But that guy is neither harmonious nor uniform; he just barrels down his own path with zero hesitation, like a heavy truck that only knows how to move forward and has no idea how to reverse."

"Then Mineyuki-kun must be his brakes?"

"Me? No way!"

Watching Mineyuki turn his head away, Makimoto couldn't help but smile.

Chapter Two

- 1 -

No matter how you look at it, this man clearly was in the wrong place.

Loose-fitting suit, long silver-white hair—his appearance wasn't exactly old, but his face carried the weight of many years, and his blue eyes only made that impression stronger. His limbs were unusually long, and he was sprinting down the street with his tongue hanging out like a dog.

Stranger still, the Shinshigai where the man now found himself was a secluded area—basically a ruin. Ordinary people wouldn't go near it even in broad daylight, let alone in the dead of night.

"Hey... you over there, old man."

A young man suddenly appeared in front of him, forcing him to stop.

Half of the young man's hair was dyed brown, and he wore a bright red jacket. Through his half-open mouth, a tongue piercing glinted. He held a small knife in his hand, and behind him stood several other youths wearing the same red jackets.

"What's the rush, pops? Why don't you hang out with us for a bit?"

"You little bastard!"

The white-haired man roared in anger and tried to run, but the group blocked his way.

"Huh?"

The leader frowned and turned his head.

"Hey, what did this guy just call me?"

"He said ‘you little bastard’."

He punched the subordinate who answered honestly, and the ring on his hand came back dripping with blood.

"Come over here, old man."

The blood-stained young man beckoned. The white-haired man walked toward him with an impatient expression and said:

"Run."

"Whah?"

"I said run. Otherwise, they will catch up."

"What the hell are you babbling abou—" Just as the leader reached out to grab the white-haired man's collar...

His entire palm vanished.

The white-haired man's expression instantly turned grim.

A second later, blood gushed from the severed wrist like a fountain.

"Aaah, aa... aah..."

Fear arrived before the pain did. The young man rolled on the ground, screaming.

The others finally realized how serious the situation was and hurriedly drew their weapons.

Whoosh!

With a faint snap, their heads flew off one after another.

"Dammit! Run already!"

Only after hearing the white-haired man shout did the boys snap back to reality. Some bolted away, while others fell but still desperately crawled forward.

Then, the white-haired man saw them.

Just ahead... a group of dark shadows was gradually closing in on the boys.

Blue-green bodies blending into the darkness, covered entirely in scales—fish. No, since they stood upright on fish-scale legs, fishmen

was probably more accurate. From two tentacle-like appendages, they fired water bullets nonstop.

In the end, none of the boys escaped.

Their once-bright red jackets were now soaked in murky black blood.

The white-haired man took a deep breath.

He was next.

He shook his head, and with a sudden swish, his neck stretched out like the body of a ceremonial lion dancer.

The fishmen reacted, turning their lidless gaze toward him.

Their tentacles fired countless water bullets in succession, yet not a single one struck the white-haired man.

A sudden, intense flash lit the pitch-black alley as brightly as if it were midday.

The water bullets flying toward him seemed to have all been shot down, leaving behind only the afterimages of explosions.

"Looks like I made it just on time."

"Wh-who are you?"

The man rubbed his eyes and turned to see clearly who it was.

"You Japanese really are polite."

The man in the dress shirt answered without even looking back.

The blond Westerner fired beams of light from the tips of his slender fingers—not only intercepting the water bullets, but engulfing the fishmen in flames.

"Even in a situation like this, you still bother greeting me? I'm Human Flare."

"I'm..."

"You're Toujou Kenshin, right?"

"I am... are you one of Mercuriali's men?"

The man calling himself Human Flare kept moving his fingers like he was playing the piano, each beam piercing through a fishman. Just

how hot were those beams, to ignite the enemies the instant they were touched and reduce them to drifting ash?

"No, I am Human Flare. Sent by Strass."

"Str... Strass?"

"Never heard of us? We're the good guys around here—the local League of Justice, if you will."

His voice was full of confidence... or perhaps it should be called

arrogance. The white-haired man instinctively took a few steps back.

"So, you're non-human—and that means a villain."

The blond man turned and pointed at him.

"Wait, I t-thought Saimatsu City allowed refugees..."

"Ah, you thought you're being saved?"

"Please, I haven't done anything! I haven't eaten anyone, and I didn't even choose to become like this!"

"Yeah, yeah, I totally get how you feel."

Human Flare shrugged.

"But I'm just following orders. You're Japanese, so you should understand—samurai, bushidou, loyalty to one's country, all that stuff, right?"

"Don't give me that crap!"

The white-haired man screamed hysterically.

"I don't want to die! I finally managed to escape here, I can't just die like this!"

His white hair slowly began to reshape into the form of a spear tip.

"I won't lose to some brat like you..."

"I'd prefer if you addressed me as ‘state-of-the-art tech.’"

"You..."

That was the last word the white-haired man ever spoke.

Thin red threads appeared around his neck, bubbling with blood.

It wasn't just his neck; in less than half a second, the man's entire body was covered in these threads.

And then he burst apart.

The countless tiny chunks of flesh no longer resembled a human being at all.

"Ah, Fantastica. You're here."

Standing behind the dead man... was a strange humanoid figure.

She wore a red rubber bodysuit covered in needle-like protrusions, and a white mask hid her face. Judging by her slender, well-proportioned figure, she was probably a woman.

Her right hand was drenched in thick black blood.

"The mission was supposed to be to capture him, right?"

"Target... resisted. Engagement protocols... permit... lethal force... in high-risk... scenarios."

An electronically synthesized voice emerged from the vocalizer.

"I see. Then let's head back."

Human Flare said as he snapped his fingers.

The chunks of flesh on the ground ignited, releasing white smoke before scattering into the wind.

And just like that, it was over.

"...How cruel."

A soft whisper echoed within the nighttime church.

The speaker was the black-haired Mercuriali Giovanni. He still wore the gentle smile his students always saw during the day—except now his pupils glowed blood red.

"Toujou Kenshin... as the leader of the Sanzenjou, he was a talent quite worthy of taking under my wing."

"The instances of Strass breaking the treaty have become increasingly serious lately."

The blond samurai beside him spoke in a heavy tone.

"If you give the order, I shall go and eliminate them immediately."

"No, the time is not yet ripe."

Mercuriali murmured as if speaking to himself:

"Still, seeing the performance of the experimental unit today was not without merit."

"If that's all they amount to, I alone could easily..."

"That's enough."

The moment Mercuriali spoke, the samurai immediately bowed his head to apologize.

"I have overstepped. My deepest apologies."

"An experimental unit is still just an experimental unit. For now, the Kumon siblings are what matter most."

As their conversation ended, the church returned to silence, and darkness swallowed the surroundings once more.

- 2 -

"Good morning, Katsuki-kun."

"Good morning, Manager-san."

"You look very tired."

"You are absolutely correct."

"Don't tell me Megumi-chan lectured you all night again?"

"Your deductive reasoning is consistently accurate, Manager-san."

Kumon Katsuki felt a deep sense of admiration for Manager-san's powers of observation.

There were countless possible reasons he might have stayed awake all night, yet she still managed to hit the correct answer in one shot.

For some reason, human beings seemed to take it for granted that they could seemingly perceive the inner thoughts of others.

They could use tiny changes in facial expression, the rise and fall in someone's voice, and all sorts of external clues to give meaning to silence, or add hidden nuance to spoken words.

This kind of information beyond mere words was apparently referred to as the "mood," and Kumon Katsuki was told to "read the room" at least once a day.

In his understanding, "mood"⊕ referred to a colorless, odorless gas.

Since it couldn't be seen, how was he supposed to detect it?

⊕The original word was "air", which Katsuki interpreted literally.

And the biggest problem was...

Most people in the world seemed to possess some special ability that Kumon Katsuki simply did not have.

He had thought that at least Megumi would understand that.

But instead, she would just become furious.

And she never addressed the actual core of the problem at all.

She only said things about how he needed to care about Makimoto-san's feelings.

"Well then, I'm heading to school."

"Take care."

On the way to school, Kumon ran into Makimoto.

"Good morning."

"Ah, good morning, Kumon-kun."

"I have a question I would like to ask you."

"Eh? What is it?"

"Makimoto-san, how do you perceive me as a person?"

"Uh..."

Makimoto-san lowered her head without saying anything. I followed her gaze toward the ground, but didn't see anything worth looking at—just the same unchanging asphalt. What exactly was Makimoto-san seeing down there?

"I suppose... as a friend."

"Is that so? I also identify Makimoto-san as a friend. Since our opinions are in accord, I suppose I may view this as a mutual understanding?"

"Y-yeah, I guess so."

Makimoto-san's voice grew quieter. Her shoulders also slumped;

with my meager knowledge, I concluded that this state was called disappointment.

"Makimoto-san, are you troubled by something?"

"N-no, nothing like that."

Her voice regained energy again. So was I just mistaken?

Reading the mood is indeed difficult.

"Morning, you two. What are you chatting about?"

"I was researching the relationship between Makimoto-san and myself and performing a confirmation."

I was simply reporting the facts, so why did Mineyuki have such a pained expression on his face?

"Makimoto, listen."

"W-what is it?"

"If something bothers you, just say it straight. When this guy says something wrong, if you don't correct him immediately, he'll pick up bad habits."

"Do you take me for a puppy or something?"

"A puppy is way cuter than you."

"I think Kumon-kun is actually quite cute."

"Is that so? Thank you for the compliment."

"Hey, a guy's supposed to get bothered when a girl says stuff like that, you know."

"Isn't ‘cute’ a word used by women as praise? Why should I be bothered by it?"

"A man shouldn't be called cute!"

"I don't think so. To me, Mineyuki-kun is actually quite cute as well."

"Cut it out."

Kumon suddenly lowered his head in deep thought.

"The mood flowing in this place at this very moment..."

"Oh? What about it?"

"Is it what one would call a ‘heartwarming mood’?"

"Yes, exactly."

Makimoto-san nodded vigorously. My hypothesis was correct after all.

Mineyuki, looking dissatisfied, reached out and ruffled my hair. I didn't understand why he did that... was it a gesture of protest?

But for now, I decided to trust Makimoto's judgment.

"A heartwarming mood... I will remember this."

Kumon Katsuki did not dislike this feeling.

- 3 -

The quiet classroom was wrapped in a tension so strong that even Kumon Katsuki could clearly feel it.

There were two reasons for this. First, Takahashi-sensei, who taught Modern Society, had terrible time management and kept lecturing even after the bell rang, making the students—who had been desperately waiting for lunch break—more and more restless.

The second reason was the unexplained noise coming from the hallway.

Just as everyone's patience was reaching its limit, Takahashi-sensei finally ended the class.

"Class Rep, give the commands."

"Yes. Stand. Bow. Sit."

After the bow, Kumon slowly took out a book to read.

Out of the corner of his eye, he happened to catch Makimoto heading toward the door, clearly wanting to see what was going on outside.

Just as Kumon was focusing his attention on his book...

"Kumon-kun?"

Makimoto was calling his name.

"Um... could you come over here for a moment?"

"I am currently reading, and I plan to eat lunch afterward. Please give me a reason to alter my schedule..."

"Megumi-chan is here."

"I see."

Though Kumon didn't know why Megumi had come, he still stood up and prepared to leave the classroom.

When he looked up, Megumi was peeking in from the doorway, only half her body visible.

The classroom instantly burst into noise, mostly curious comments about Megumi and a few teasing remarks.

Kumon quickened his pace.

"Onii-san."

The classroom fell silent in an instant.

Seeing this reaction, Megumi was so startled she took a step back.

"Hey! Kumon."

"She called you onii-san?"

Several boys asked Kumon in a familiar tone.

"S-so cute..."

"Is that Kumon-kun's younger sister?"

A few girls added their completely unoriginal comments.

Amidst this chaos...

"Yo, Megumi-chan!"

A louder voice cut through the noise in the classroom.

It was Mineyuki. After waving to greet Megumi, he turned and swept the room with a fierce glare, which immediately reduced the chatter.

"Megumi, what are you doing here?"

"Onii-san, your bento..."

Megumi handed Kumon a bundle. It was a bento that Manager-san had made using the breakfast she always cooked too much of. Since it was in Megumi's hands, it meant that Kumon had forgotten to bring his bento to school.

"Thank you."

After Kumon accepted the bento, he intended to return to his seat, but Mineyuki grabbed his shoulder to stop him.

"Hold on. The weather's great today, so why don't we all go eat on the rooftop?"

"Good idea. Let's do that."

Makimoto also nodded in agreement.

"Hmm, but doesn't Megumi lack a bento?"

"U-um, Manager-san made one for me too."

"Then there is no problem."

Seeing Kumon nod, the other three all sighed simultaneously for some reason.

"Is this also what they call a heartwarming mood?"

"Not at all!"

Mineyuki gave him a light smack on the head, while Megumi and Makimoto both sighed and shook their heads.

Kumon muttered quietly to himself.

(Reading the mood is indeed difficult.)

- 4 -

"Man, it's practically freezing. Look at that frost"

"Since it is currently autumn, regardless of whether the temperature is high or low, because of the blowing cold wind, the body perceives the temperature as quite low, but it likely has not reached the point of forming frost."

Kumon offered a deadpan explanation.

For humans, what matters isn't the numerical temperature, but the temperature they actually feel, so there were barely any people on the rooftop.

"Let's eat around here."

Makimoto and Megumi-chan took out handkerchiefs to spread on the ground, while Kumon and Mineyuki sat directly on the concrete.

Then everyone opened their own bento.

Mineyuki unwrapped the cloth around his bento box. His lunch was truly spartan—just a boiled egg and three rice balls. If he's following some kind of ascetic diet, that's his business. It's not my place to question someone else's ‘beliefs’.

Makimoto-san's bento gave off a warm feeling, filled with an abundance of bright yellow and green vegetables, grilled fish, decorative sausages, and apple slices. She clearly put a lot of effort into it.

What surprised me most was that the contents of my own bento and Megumi's were completely different.

My own bento appeared to be a nutritionally optimized arrangement centered around fried chicken.

Megumi's, on the other hand, was a diet meal centered around root vegetables.

"Hmm, so Manager-san intended to eat both of these bentos herself? She is unexpectedly quite a big eater."

Everyone's eyes suddenly focused on me. I wasn't sure why... I probably said something wrong.

Mineyuki let out a heavy sigh, breaking the silence.

"Anyway, Manager-san's bento looks really delicious."

"I am not sharing any with you."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm very particular about good food."

"So am I!"

"Even so, you don't have the right to take someone else's property."

"You won't lose anything. Let's just trade a little."

Kumon glanced at Mineyuki's bento.

"There is nothing there I particularly wish to eat."

"Stingy! Just give me a bite!"

As Mineyuki spoke, his chopsticks shot out, aiming for the fried chicken. This was no ordinary deep-brown fried chicken made with reused oil from a cheap bento shop, but golden-brown nuggets made from high-quality free-range chicken, seasoned only with sake and salt —no soy sauce, no garlic.

Kumon's chopsticks were not to be outdone, immediately thrusting forward to intercept.

Four wooden sticks clashed dozens of times, finally locking in midair, neither side giving an inch.

"You two, stop it right now!"

Makimoto put down her chopsticks and raised her voice.

Megumi, meanwhile, was happily eating simmered taro, wearing an ecstatic expression.

"Makimoto, don't stop me. I'm going to teach this guy the ways of the world."

"Do your ‘ways of the world’ involve plundering the food others rely on for survival?"

"You idiot! I'm talking about the spirit of generosity!"

The chopsticks began to bend under their strength, the two men pressing harder as if trying to overpower each other.

"Makimoto-nee-san."

Megumi tugged on Makimoto's skirt as she stood up.

"What is it, Megumi-chan?"

"It's fine to leave them alone."

"Hmm..."

Makimoto tilted her head, thinking.

"I know they get along well, but quarreling like this still isn't good."

After saying that, she stood up and spoke to the two whose argument was growing increasingly heated.

"Kumon-kun, Mineyuki-kun, haven't you two had enough?"

"...Sharing should come from the heart. What you're doing is no different from provocation."

"Shut up. Haven't you heard that ‘to give is to receive’? By the same logic, if you give me something, you'll naturally get something back someday. For the sake of my friend's happiness, I... I'm going to take your..."

"You two, stop it right now!"

Makimoto grabbed both of their hands, trying to pull them apart.

At that exact moment, the chopsticks, having reached their limit, snapped with a sharp crack.

Losing their balance, both men fell forward together, dragging Makimoto down with them as she held their wrists.

"Ah! Onii-san!"

Megumi shouted in panic, but she couldn't stop gravity and momentum from doing their job.

The three collapsed onto the ground in a sandwich-like pile.

"Ouch!"

The first to cry out was Mineyuki. The reason was simple: he had just taken a hard kick to the side of his abdomen.

"Move!"

The one who had delivered the kick was Megumi, and that kick

was filled with murderous intent.

"Guh... ugh."

Mineyuki gritted his teeth through the pain and rolled off the other two.

...Wasn't that kick a bit too brutal?

Mineyuki, secretly complaining in his heart, looked at the scene of the accident and immediately understood where that murderous intent had come from.

What entered his sight were Kumon Katsuki and Makimoto stacked on top of each other—face to face, chest to chest, at zero distance.

"O-Onii-san!"

Megumi screamed anxiously and desperately tried to pull them apart. With Mineyuki joining the rescue effort, Kumon Katsuki finally managed to stand up.

Makimoto, on the other hand... she remained motionless, staring blankly at the sky, her face bright red, breathing fast.

Kumon licked the blood on his lip.

Megumi glared at him.

"Onii-san, why is there blood on your lip?"

"It was merely a case of the mucous membranes striking the teeth during mutual contact. The laceration itself is minor, but I am concerned about bacterial transmission. Although I do not suffer from any illnesses, since there was direct contact with blood, for safety's sake, I must check for the risk of acquired immunodeficiency syndro..."

Before Kumon could finish, a clean, sharp low kick struck his shin.

"Uwah!"

Kumon collapsed to the ground, clutching his leg.

Megumi ran off the rooftop crying, and only then did Makimoto finally get up.

"Makimoto-san, are you all right?"

"I-I'm fine."

"Is that so? That's good."

"Um, that, Kumon-kun. Just now, that..."

"Hmm?"

"It was... nothing, right?"

"The phrase ‘it's nothing’ is a semantic contradiction. Events are constantly occurring; thus, I infer Makimoto-san is using that phrase to signal a reservation of opinion rather than an absence of it. Exactly what..."

"Stop rambling and go after Megumi-chan already!"

"Yeah, I think that would be best too."

"Is that so? Although I do not quite understand, it seems as though I have hurt Megumi."

"...Well, that's life. Things never go as expected."

"Even if it was an accident, since I have hurt her, I must take responsibility."

Kumon winced as he stood up. His leg was clearly still hurting.

"Honestly, you're so hopeless."

Mineyuki glanced toward Makimoto.

"I'll clean up the bentos. You two go on ahead."

"Ah, thanks. Alright, let's go."

"Thank you, Makimoto-san."

The three childhood friends left the rooftop, leaving Makimoto alone against the cold autumn wind blowing toward her.

Although the three of them had fallen to the ground together, the bentos were miraculously intact, so Makimoto began wrapping them back up.

Despite the cold wind blowing nonstop, she didn't feel cold at all.

She closed her eyes and touched her lips with her fingertips.

Gently, slowly, she stroked them back and forth.

Her first kiss. No... that probably doesn't count. It was just a coincidence. Thinking that, Makimoto opened her eyes again.

"I'd better clean up quickly."

Just as she finished packing, the afternoon class bell rang. A faint smile appeared on her face.

On the way back to the classroom, Makimoto ran into Megumi-chan.

"Sorry, Onii-san caused you trouble."

"Megumi-chan, your eyes are all red."

"Eh? Eh?"

Megumi kept rubbing her eyes, but they only grew redder the more she wiped.

"Wait a moment."

Makimoto went to the sink, wet her handkerchief, and handed it to Megumi.

"I kind of understand how Kumon-kun is, so I won't take what happened to heart."

Just as she said that, her own heart gave a slight throb of pain.

"So Megumi-chan shouldn't worry about it either, okay?"

Megumi-chan's heart must hurt even more.

"Um... thank you."

The young girl hurried down the stairs. Once she returned to the boarding house and waited for Kumon to get home, they would likely have a small quarrel before making up.

So cute. So enviable. Makimoto couldn't help thinking that.

Just as she was lost in thought, a commotion rose from inside the classroom.

Her hand froze on the door handle, and she began imagining the scene inside.

Seeing Kumon Katsuki's cute little sister return to class crying, everyone would definitely start questioning him. And how would Kumon answer?

"Because my lips accidentally came into contact with Makimoto-san's, Megumi suddenly got angry and left."

Just imagining it was enough to make her face burn.

Kumon would definitely say that. He wouldn't have any other way of explaining it.

Normally, Mineyuki could just shout and calm the class down, but this time was different.

Makimoto took a deep breath and opened the classroom door.

This was her duty as the Class Rep.

- 5 -

After school, the three of them practically fled the classroom.

"What on earth happened before I walked in?"

"A riot broke out."

Mineyuki gave a short, firm reply.

Kumon had chased after Megumi, who had stormed out of the classroom in anger.

Their conversation was overheard by the entire class, and Kumon was immediately dragged back inside for questioning. Mineyuki used the chance to help Megumi escape.

At that time, Makimoto had returned to the classroom and was desperately trying to restore order before the teacher arrived... that was how everything happened.

"I must express my gratitude regarding that matter."

"This guy really is something, always adding fuel to the fire."

"I was merely explaining what happened at that time as objectively as possible."

"If you had just told a tiny lie, things wouldn't have gotten so complicated!"

"Misunderstandings only breed more misunderstandings; honesty is what is most important."

"...Life never goes the way you want it to!"

"Nah, it's more like this guy's brain short-circuits."

"Kumon-kun didn't do it on purpose... well, maybe a little... but not that..."

"I do not understand what you're trying to say. I would appreciate it if you could organize your argument before speaking... Ouch!"

Mineyuki jabbed Kumon with his elbow.

"Enough, let's leave it at that."

"Alright."

Kumon obediently shut his mouth.

"If everyone in the world could talk to each other heart-to-heart without hiding anything, perhaps that would be nice."

"True. But as long as there are people who won't listen to reason, it's probably not going to go that smoothly..."

"Reality itself is already sufficiently complex. Is there really a need to deceive others with words and increase that complexity?"

"It's the opposite. It's because the world is full of trouble that we need language to simplify things."

"I see. The symbolization of language is indeed indispensable for identifying things. Even so, there must be a limit..."

"Um... my house is this way."

"Is that so? Then see you tomorrow."

"Are you alright going alone, Makimoto? Things haven't been very peaceful lately. Want us to walk you home?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the Cannibal killings. The case still isn't over. It's being called the worst thing that happened since the war."

"I seem to have heard of that incident before... they still haven't caught the culprit?"

It was rare to hear even a hint of agitation in Kumon's voice, and it made Makimoto instinctively stop in her tracks to listen carefully.

"The modus operandi appears consistent across all reported instances."

"That implies the culprit is the same individual, or the possibility of a group crime is high. What about the range?"

"Around Saimatsu City, but the range isn't very large."

"That is too abnormal."

"You don't have to tell me that."

"Listen closely, Mineyuki. Serial killers can be divided into two types: the ‘Wide-Area’ type and the ‘Self-Destructive’ type."

"What's that?"

"Wide-area killers spread out the time and location of their crimes; it's what's known as random killing. The police often fail to notice it's a ‘serial’ event, so they are slower to catch on. Conversely, if it can be determined that it's the same culprit, then making an arrest becomes much easier."

"And the self-destructive type?"

"The self-destructive type commits multiple crimes within a narrow area over a short period. Naturally, they are caught very quickly."

"Hmm... so this time it's a self-destructive type serial killer?"

"Correct. As the name suggests, it is a criminal act that leads oneself and others toward ruin. However, no arrest has been made to this day, which is why I find it abnormal."

Weird as it seems... the police probably have something tying their hands.

"It is possible. Perhaps pressure from high-ranking police officials

is hindering the investigation, or perhaps the culprit's methods are too extraordinary, leading to the delay in solving the case."

After thinking for a moment, Kumon said:

"You said the culprit is called the Cannibal. Were the bodies really eaten?"

"Yeah."

Mineyuki glanced at Makimoto's face and lowered his voice:

"The amount eaten is way more than a single person could ever finish."

"...How dangerous. There are too many uncertain factors."

Kumon turned to Makimoto.

"Therefore, Makimoto-san, you must be careful when commuting to and from school."

"Uh... even if you say that..."

"No need to be so polite. There are two guys here with nothing better to do. We can walk you home."

"No, it's fine, I came by bus. Walking me this far is enough."

"I see. Well, goodbye then."

"Goodbye, Kumon-kun, Mineyuki-kun."

Makimoto walked around the corner, and the voices of the two gradually faded.

A sudden cold wind swept past.

After confirming no one was around, Makimoto touched her lips. In the chill of the evening, that was the only place that still felt warm.

Chapter Three

- 1 -

In the sterile laboratory so white it hurt to keep your eyes open...

The blond man... Human Flare was lying on the operating table.

"Hey! Doctor, could you hurry up and finish already?"

A female doctor stood to the side holding a medical chart; she wore a warm, almost homey smile.

"But... it's rare to get actual combat data. Let me examine it a little more thoroughly."

"Oh no!"

Though the doctor's tone sounded light, the cheerful American's face was drenched in cold sweat.

"Well then, let's begin."

With a terrifyingly casual air, she proceeded to drive a myriad of needles into his flesh without a moment's hesitation. Seven needles were connected to numbered cables, another seven were for injecting drugs, and the last four were for drawing bodily fluids.

"Fuck!"

The man clenched his teeth, enduring the pain.

"Now, now, no foul language. You're a big boy now, so be brave for me."

"Got it, doctor."

She soothed the man in a tone similar to a dentist coaxing a child.

Human Flare did not hate this woman named Ugaya.

To be precise, he was unable to hate her, because the drugs

injected into his body contained compounds that affected mental functions.

They were designed to make him feel a sense of closeness toward this woman and toward the organization... Strass.

They didn't destroy his sense of self, nor did they rob him of the ability to distinguish right from wrong. They simply made him incapable of hatred.

Even knowing that the woman before him was a terrifying sadist, he could only obey.

Just as one won't stop their mother even when aware she's doing wrong; and just as one will lay down their life for their father despite knowing it's wrong.

Except he had no idea who his biological parents were. He had grown up strong on his own in the slums before being sold to this island nation.

"Alright, I'm going to start the testing and adjustments."

"Yes sir!"

The moment he opened his mouth, electrical waves surged through his entire body, producing a pain like fire circulating inside him, melting him from within.

"Hey... doctor?"

He tried to distract himself by talking.

"What is it? Careful not to bite your tongue."

"There sure have been a lot of deployments lately. It's getting pretty hard not to get spotted."

"Oh, that? Apparently it's because the G-type (fishmen) have been going out of control recently."

"Out of control?"

Saimatsu City was home to many non-humans. Their fate as non-humans was that they could not survive without eating humans, so they always lurked in the shadows, attacking people from the dark.

Strass, the organization Human Flare belonged to, was a

pharmaceutical company on the surface, but in reality it was an organization that exterminated non-humans and protected the city's order.

Normally, non-humans only attacked from the shadows. They would never openly strike at humans.

"It seems that although there used to be many fishmen, now that they're on the verge of extinction, the pressure has made them increasingly violent. Because of that, we have to speed up our sample collection too."

"I see."

"So then, Human Flare-kun. Haven't I been constantly reminding you not to turn all the fishmen into ash? Bring back at least a little bit to use as a sample."

As she spoke, she increased the voltage.

"Ok, doctor...!"

The man squeezed these words out through tightly clenched teeth.

How stupid. Fishmen or whatever they were—spending time on these pointless experiments was a waste. It would be far more meaningful to burn through his life however he pleased.

But that was nothing more than a fantasy.

Next time he was deployed, he would surely capture a few fishmen alive.

He understood his situation all too well.

- 2 -

"Is that Ugaya? Come in."

"S-sorry to disturb you."

Her attitude was completely different from before. Her voice trembled with fear.

"How is the adjustment of the enhanced experimental subjects progressing?"

Standing before Ugaya was the president of Strass Pharmaceuticals, Koudaka Shirou.

"H-Human Flare's condition is very stable. Metabolism and thought control show no abnormalities, and there are no signs of declining intelligence levels."

Ugaya said everything in one breath, then wiped the sweat from her forehead.

"And the others?"

"Speed Star shows some signs of decline in intelligence, but he can still be utilized directly. As for N1 through N6, there has been no progress."

"Then N9... Fantastica?"

"Fantastica... hasn't returned yet."

"Isn't today her inspection day?"

Koudaka asked quietly, yet the pressure in his voice was suffocating.

"I-I'm sure she'll be back v-very soon, for sure..."

Just then, Ugaya's phone rang with a cheerful melody. Only after seeing Koudaka nod his permission did Ugaya dare to answer.

"What? She's back? Alright, I understand. Send her to the inspection room immediately."

She hung up and prepared to report.

"Um, about that..."

"I understand the gist of it."

"Y-yes, it's just... it seems the brainwashing still isn't thorough enough. I'll inject more drugs and perform further adjustments, so..."

"Don't do that."

Koudaka let out a sigh, and the sound alone made Ugaya's entire body tense up.

"Fantastica is our trump card. If her current condition is stable, there's no need to inject any more drugs."

"I-I understand. Then I'll just punish her..."

Koudaka shot her a cold glance, signaling her to be silent.

"Follow the usual procedures. However, perform the examination diligently."

"Understood. Then I'll take my leave."

The doctor... no, the scientist, bowed and exited the room.

Koudaka let out a heavy sigh.

This woman certainly had talent, but aside from that she was worthless; as long as she could experiment on people, she would gladly work under anyone.

To put it plainly, she was a depraved woman.

Even so, she remained an indispensable pawn.

To completely eradicate the non-humans.

No matter how much blood must be shed, all sacrifices were for the sake of peace.

To achieve that goal...

"We need to capture Kumon Katsuki as soon as possible."

Koudaka muttered to himself.

- 3 -

The next morning.

Walking out of the boarding house, Kumon Katsuki organized the current chaotic situation in his mind.

Makimoto Misae and Kumon Katsuki were of the opposite sex and were also quite close friends; in such a situation, it was highly probable for love to sprout between them.

A kiss... that is, contact between lips, was one form of romance, or an action taken to confirm the love between two people.

But for Kumon, this was where the real conundrum began. Megumi understood that his relationship with Makimoto was not romantic, and even if it had been, he saw no issue with that.

Even so, a kiss devoid of a romantic intent still seemed to have hurt Megumi's heart.

He truly could not understand why.

When it came down to it, the event was merely an unforeseen accident.

Although he had to take responsibility for it, it had not been intentional.

But the fact remained that Megumi was hurt, and that made Kumon deeply upset.

"Onii-san, take care."

Megumi looked displeased, and her voice sounded weak and drained.

"Mm. I'm heading to school."

Kumon couldn't think of anything he should say to his little sister.

He could only set off for school with heavy footsteps.

Makimoto Misae was startled.

It was because she clearly knew she would meet Kumon Katsuki at the corner ahead.

It wasn't a vague premonition, but a surging sensation—resembling the warmth that radiates through one's chest after a swallow of hot tea.

She understood the feeling of unrequited love, and she understood what sexual desire was, but neither of those matched what she was feeling now. Makimoto couldn't help feeling confused.

"Kumon-kun."

Makimoto instinctively called out that person's name toward the corner.

"Good morning, Makimoto-san."

Her chest grew hotter and hotter. She really wanted to hold his hand, wanted to lean close to him. Just a little more... just one more step...

"What is the matter?"

Kumon's voice snapped Makimoto out of her thoughts.

"Sorry, I think I'm feeling a little unwell."

"Hmm. You must take good care of your own body. Do you have a fever?"

"Maybe... I guess."

Her entire body was burning.

"Then I will walk you home so you can rest."

"N-no, it's fine."

"There is no need to push yourself."

Makimoto refused in a panic, but Kumon still took her hand.

The rising heat in her body instantly turned into an indescribable sense of comfort.

It was such a blissful feeling that Makimoto couldn't help leaning her body against Kumon's shoulder.

"What's wrong? Are you alright?"

Kumon asked anxiously.

Makimoto took a deep breath and stood up straight again.

"I'm fine now."

"Logically speaking, a sudden recovery from acute vertigo is statistically improbable. Can you identify the primary symptom's origin?"

"I'm not sure..."

Only one thing was clear to her: being near Kumon made her feel

very comfortable.

"I should still walk you home. Also, remember to go see a doctor."

"Eh? Ah..."

Makimoto suddenly remembered something.

Kumon won't be allowed to enter the dormitory. What should she do?

"Hey, what's going on with you two?"

Just then, Mineyuki appeared.

"Makimoto-san suddenly felt unwell. I was about to take her home to rest."

"That's not good!"

Mineyuki frowned.

"Then I'll go report her sick leave."

"I'll leave it to you."

"Strike while the iron's hot, man. Get her home, quick."

"W-wait..."

"Alright, I'm heading to school."

Makimoto didn't even have time to stop him; Mineyuki had already dashed off.

Then, she saw Kumon reach out his hand.

"Makimoto-san, which direction is your home?"

Makimoto hesitated for a moment, but in the end, she still took his hand.

- 4 -

Makimoto held Kumon's hand as they walked to the station and boarded the train. Time passed quietly.

"Your face is still very red. It would be better to go home and rest."

Makimoto could only nod silently. Right now she felt as if she were soaking in a hot spring, wrapped in an inexplicable sense of happiness.

Clearly, something was wrong with her entire body.

"By the way..."

Kumon Katsuki checked his watch.

"Makimoto-san, what time do you usually wake up?"

"Probably... around seven, I think."

Makimoto answered, her mind in a daze.

"Then it is strange. Even if one sets off for school from this station at seven in the morning, they would certainly be very late. However, the time and place where Makimoto-san and I met were no different from usual. Therefore, I surmise that Makimoto-san's home is not in this direction."

"Mm... mm."

"So this is what is called skipping school?"

"You could say that."

"I do not understand. No matter how I look at it, Makimoto-san does not seem like the type of person who would skip school."

"That's not true."

"What do you mean?"

"You're wrong."

"Actually, I often want to skip school too. It's just that, because I'm the Class Rep..."

"You feel you have to set an example for the other students?"

"It's not really that... um... it's more that I don't like drawing attention to myself in class."

"Drawing attention?"

"How should I put it... I just don't want people to see me as

someone unique."

"There are forty people in the class; I believe everyone has their own unique characteristics."

"That's not what I meant..."

Makimoto was running out of words.

"Then is it about ruining the mood?"

"Something like that. Being Class Rep makes people assume you shouldn't do things like that..."

"Would one be punished for going against that assumption? Wait... if we follow that logic, does that mean I, as a regular student, am not subjected to any punishment?"

"Mm... well, it's not like there's any ‘real’ punishment involved..."

"So the ‘punishment’ for disrupting the mood is simply a corrective, intensified shift in that same mood?"

"Something like that."

"Hmm... does that mean I actually receive the appropriate ‘punishment’ for disrupting the mood, but I'm simply unaware of it?"

"Ah, sorry... I didn't mean to call you dense, Kumon-kun..."

"No, I am actually quite pleased."

"Eh?"

"If someone harbors ill intent but never ends up harming me, then isn't that incredibly fortunate?"

"I-is it?"

"Suppose a person throws a stone at another person with lethal intent. If it hits, it is murder, and the perpetrator will share the same tragic fate as the victim. Conversely, if it does not hit, and even the act of throwing goes unnoticed, then the tragedy never occurs. Isn't that a good thing?"

"I guess that... kind of makes sense..."

Makimoto nodded, a little overwhelmed by Kumon's words.

"But sensing someone's malice is still important, no? You can talk

it out calmly and reconcile afterwards."

"That is the best possible course of action. However, someone like me, who cannot detect the malice of others, is unfortunately deprived of such opportunity."

Watching Kumon speak so earnestly, Makimoto suddenly realized something.

This person wasn't a weirdo, nor was he someone obsessed with logic.

He was just someone who simply lived by his own rules—stubborn and unwavering.

"Um, Kumon-kun."

"What is it?"

"If one day, you realize that only your opinion is correct and everyone else is wrong, what would you do?"

"I do not possess excessive confidence in my own knowledge. I would decide based on the scale and sampling of ‘everyone’. If I still faced opposition from the majority, I would re-examine whether my own argument was flawed."

"And after that, what if you still believe you aren't wrong?"

"That is a matter of definition. If I consider myself to be correct, then I will carry it through to the end."

Just as she thought.

Even if the whole world stood against him, this person would still say, "Logically speaking, I am the one who is correct."

Her body grew hot, her heartbeat wouldn't calm down, but none of that mattered anymore.

"That's... that's really amazing."

"Is it? To me, it is only natural."

Without hesitation, spoken as casually as commenting on tomorrow's weather—and that profile.

In that instant, Makimoto Misae fell in love.

"...Kumon-kun really is amazing."

"What makes you say that?"

"I've always wanted to be an ordinary person."

"That depends on what your definition of ordinary is."

Makimoto took a deep breath, enduring Kumon's direct gaze, and gave a small, self-mocking smile at how she was slowly getting used to it.

"When I say ordinary, I mean someone who doesn't stand out."

"Do you mean that being noticed has both advantages and disadvantages?"

"Yes. I think it's fine even if I'm not noticed. As long as I can live a simple, happy life, that's enough."

"I can understand that. But what does that have to do with you saying I am amazing?"

"Unlike me, you're very unordinary... or maybe I should say, very noticeable."

"Everyone seems to view me that way."

"But somehow, you still look happy."

"Everyone's definition of happiness is different. In my subjective assessment, I am satisfied with my current life."

"That's why I think you're amazing."

"Your argument is very vague."

"Mm... generally speaking, to make yourself seem ordinary, there are a lot of unpleasant things you have to do, both to yourself and to others. I've lived that way all this time."

Makimoto took another breath and continued:

"And I think the fact that Kumon-kun can live so unordinary is a sign of great courage."

"This is merely my nature; I cannot help it myself, so it is not

worthy of your respect. Besides..."

"What?"

"I've never seen you do anything unpleasant to others."

"That's because I'm the Class Rep. Even if I'm a little strict, no one really notices."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"I see. But Makimoto-san, didn't you abandon being ordinary today and choose to skip school?"

"Yes... sorry."

"You have no need to apologize. I simply do not understand why you wanted to bring me along."

"That's because..."

"Mm."

"I want to go to the amusement park with you, Kumon-kun."

"I see."

Kumon's expression didn't change. He simply nodded.

"Are you angry?"

"I'm not angry. I just don't understand your intention. I think you should have confirmed with me first."

"I'm really sorry for lying to you, it's just that I..."

If only she had more courage. Hints never worked on Kumon-kun. Only words stripped of all embellishment could reach him.

It was obvious.

But it was something that ordinary people found hard to do.

Makimoto gently touched her lips with her fingertips and said:

"Maybe it's because I like you, Kumon-kun."

Makimoto already knew how Kumon would respond, and she was prepared to spend time explaining. Fortunately, the amusement park was still a distance away—plenty of time to talk.

Kumon slowly spoke:

"Please provide a definition for ‘like’ in this context."

- 5 -

Walking out of the station, they arrived at the amusement park known as the Dream Kingdom, but the place clearly lacked funding, leaving only aging buildings and a sparse trickle of visitors.

"Let me confirm something first. Makimoto-san, you said you like me, correct?"

"Yes."

Nothing could frighten a girl who had already opened her heart.

"I... have no experience with what is called ‘romance’."

"I-is that so?"

"Generally speaking, what is called romance is a form of subjective illusion."

"An illusion!?"

"First, one must consider the emotional state defined as ‘liking.’"

"Mm."

"This refers to the act of devoting attention and affection to a specific few people or things. For example, I like Megumi, Mineyuki, and Makimoto-san; therefore, the attention and affection I give you three is higher than what I give others."

"Th-thank you..."

"If it is a simple case of ‘liking,’ one must consider the balance of interpersonal relationships. Situations may arise where Megumi likes you, but Mineyuki dislikes you. In such cases, one must maintain objective thinking."

"I... I suppose so."

So Kumon-kun actually considers things like that, Makimoto thought to herself.

"Romance, on the other hand, involves concentrating one's attention thoroughly on a specific individual. In that situation, because you lose any point of comparison, you cannot maintain an objective viewpoint, and you easily act based on subjective impulses. Furthermore, when coupled with sexual impulses, it causes people to take irrational actions in the majority of cases."

"Uh... I... I guess that's true."

So this is what it means to speak so bluntly.

"Makimoto-san's series of actions today fits the aforementioned criteria; thus, it seems true that you harbor romantic feelings for me as you claimed."

"However, while I currently like Makimoto-san, it is not with romantic affection, nor have I ever thought about falling in love with Makimoto-san."

Makimoto bit her lip. Was this a roundabout... no, a direct rejection? No, that wasn't it.

"I wish to ask Makimoto-san: why did you fall in love with me?"

"Ah? Eh?"

"If I can parse those variables, I might be able to construct a viable simulation of the romantic experience."

I have to think fast; there's still a sliver of hope. I need to quickly find the thin thread that leads into Kumon-kun's heart.

"Kumon-kun, how about we start with the form first?"

"The form?"

"Let's try imitating people who are in love. If we do that, maybe after some time we can actually enjoy it."

"Hm, that does make sense."

"Good. Then today, Kumon-kun and I are a couple, and we're going on a date right now, understood?"

"Certainly."

For some reason, Kumon showed a confident smile.

"Two adult tickets, and a guide booklet."

The middle-aged woman sitting at the counter looked these two young people in their uniforms up and down...

"Have a fun time."

She finally whispered those words.

- 6 -

The empty pathways, the dull colors of the park, the peeling paint on the walls, and a few employees wandering around in mascot costumes.

...It feels... a bit lacking in mood...

Makimoto couldn't help but sigh.

It was a weekday morning, and with the recent serial murders, far fewer people were willing to go out, so of course the amusement park was nearly deserted.

Anyone who still comes to this amusement park must be someone who believes there's still magic here. The smell of the air, the glow of the lights, the chorus of sounds—all of it becomes magic. Even if you know it's artificial, as long as you believe, the magic is real.

"It seems this park is held together by pure faith."

Kumon murmured his impression softly; he seemed to be thinking the same thing.

"Don't worry, we'll be fine."

Makimoto clenched her fist and continued:

"Because couples in love only have eyes for each other, they pay no mind to their surroundings or other people."

"I see."

Kumon stopped walking and stared straight at Makimoto. His eyes, just as the words implied, saw absolutely nothing else.

Makimoto felt both happy and embarrassed, her face growing redder and redder.

She knew why he was doing this; Kumon Katsuki was simply acting according to the literal meaning of her words.

Even so, she couldn't stop her heartbeat from growing more intense, and the hand holding his grew hotter and hotter.

As time passed, Makimoto finally felt the pressure.

She counted to ten in her head, then looked away and exhaled.

"What is the matter?"

"Um, I was just speaking metaphorically earlier. It's safer to look ahead while walking."

"Is that so?"

Makimoto tightened her grip on Kumon's wrist.

—I'm acting really strange today.

I like Kumon-kun, and I finally have enough courage, but... something feels different. It's like something inside me refuses to leave Kumon-kun's side.

—Forget it, don't worry about it.

Going on a date with someone you like is also one of the ‘ordinary’ things I've longed for.

"Well then, where shall we go next? I have no particular opinion on the matter, so I will leave the decision to you."

...Even if this doesn't feel like a very ordinary date, a date is still a date.

Wait a second.

"Kumon-kun, we are on a date right now, right?"

"Hmm... if a so-called date refers to spending time with one's lover with the intention of furthering the relationship, then we are indeed on a date."

...Good thing I asked first.

Makimoto let out a sigh.

"So, what kind of activities are primarily conducted on a so-called date?"

"That..."

Makimoto hurriedly looked around.

"Th-then, Kumon-kun, how about we go check that out?"

"No objections."

What Makimoto pointed to at random was a signboard for "Galactic Detective Beowulf Live Show: Heroes of the Ages Assemble!".

- 7 -

There were very few spectators in the seating area.

When one thought about it, the serial killing case was still unresolved, so it was unlikely that parents would bring their children to an amusement park on a weekday.

A middle-aged salaryman was sprawled out behind the stage, sleeping comfortably without a care.

"This is quite unexpected."

"Eh? What is?"

"I did not expect Makimoto-san to be interested in this kind of show."

"What about you, Kumon-kun?"

"Hmm. Since I haven't been exposed to it before, I have no way of knowing whether I like it or not."

"I actually feel a bit nostalgic."

"Nostalgic?"

"Because my elder sister really loved this series."

"You have a sister, Makimoto-san?"

"She is no longer with us."

"I see."

Kumon only nodded lightly.

There was no half-hearted sympathy, which somehow made things feel less awkward.

"Your sister liked watching hero shows?"

"Yeah. She would often imitate the protagonists too. Whenever she saw a quarrel, she'd jump right in."

"She actively placed herself in violent situations? In that regard, she is somewhat similar to you, Makimoto-san."

"...W-well I do step in when people are fighting, but I try to calm them down and not make things worse."

"Meaning you use strategy instead of pure violence?"

"S-something like that."

"That is commendable. People always hope for matters to be resolved peacefully."

"But Onee-san, even if she saw delinquents fighting on the street, she'd rush in to stop them."

"Hmm. Taking on enemies larger than oneself all alone... your sister must have had quite a great deal of courage."

"Well... it wasn't really like that. If anything, she was just way too reckless..."

"Even so, her personality sounds fascinating. It's a shame I will never have the chance to meet her."

"Yeah..."

"By the way, what did you mean by ‘no longer with us’?"

Makimoto felt a sharp pain in her chest.

"Generally speaking, it's a gentle way of referring to parting through death."

"I see. Language truly is complex."

It seemed Kumon had understood.

"Everyone, the hero show is about to begin! But before that, can you all make a little agreement with big sis here?"

The host on stage tried to stir up the mood with an excited voice. Even with so few visitors, she still worked hard. Makimoto quietly admired her dedication.

"Speaking of which..."

"Mm?"

"What kind of story is ‘Galactic Detective Beowulf’?"

"Mm... the content is surprisingly deep."

"Is it not a program for children?"

"That's true, but when I was little, I couldn't understand the story at all."

Just then, the narration began.

—The cosmic spore Grendel, which absorbs all kinds of organic and inorganic matter and mutates them.

To shield our world from Grendel's encroaching shadow, the liquid-metal lifeform Hrunting was sent to Earth!

Today as well, Oozora Kakeru must work together with Hrunting residing within him, and fight as Galactic Detective Beowulf.

"I see."

Kumon said this while staring straight at the stage.

The costumed actors struck cool poses from elevated platforms, then performed agile fight scenes on stage.

"I know I dragged you here on my own, but... Kumon-kun, do you actually like this kind of performance?"

"I'm very interested."

"Is that so? That's good."

The show reached its climax.

To fight Grendel and protect Beowulf, the Galactic Detectives and heroes from past generations all appeared on stage.

After overcoming a brief bout of infighting, they finally reached the source of all evil.

But as the corrupting waves unleashed by Supreme Overlord Grendel's Mother washed over them, the heroes twisted in agony.

"Everyone, Beowulf is in danger! Hurry and call out to him loudly!"

The venue was silent. The only actual audience members... were Kumon and Makimoto.

"Be-Beowulf..."

Makimoto called out quietly.

"If you don't shout louder, he won't hear you!"

Kumon widened his eyes and shouted:

"Beowulf!"

He clenched his fist and shouted with force:

"Beowulf!"

Makimoto raised her voice as well:

"Beowulf～～!"

Before they knew it, more voices joined in. The office worker who had been sleeping, and the young people in the front row holding cameras, all joined the cheering.

"Beowulf! Beowulf!"

The cries for the hero echoed through the quiet amusement park.

The hero, who had been lying on the stage all but defeated, seemed to draw strength from these voices, dragging himself forward inch by inch.

"What's the matter? Is this all the so-called ‘Strongest’ of all the Galactic Detectives can do?"

"Beowulf! Beowulf!"

Beowulf extended his arm, hooked back the Galaxy Sword on the ground with his fingertips, and used it as a crutch to prop himself up, standing tall on the stage once more.

The audience erupted in cheers.

"I will never allow this Earth, where plants, animals, fish, birds, and humans all live together, be devoured by the likes of you!"

Beowulf shouted with all his strength:

"Galaxy Sword... Galactic Blazing Slash!"

And just like that, the forces of evil were defeated, and cheers of victory filled the air.

Just as the host announced that the autograph session would begin soon, the two of them stood up.

Makimoto let out a small sigh.

"I don't think the plot was as complex as you said..."

"Since it's a hero show, it seems the plot was adjusted so even children can understand it."

"Then what was the actual story like?"

"Mm... I was little back then, so I don't remember much."

Makimoto began trying hard to recall.

"Even though the protagonist is a Warrior of Justice, he's actually a very ordinary person in daily life."

"What do you mean ‘ordinary’...?"

"Well, he's not strong, and he has lots of worries just like anyone else."

"In other words, his mental state is no different from an ordinary person's?"

"Mm... you could say that. Kumon-kun, do you like stories like

this?"

"I haven't seen the original work, so I am not sure... but I found the performance just now very interesting."

"I'm glad. Since it's a show for kids, I was worried you'd find it boring, Kumon-kun."

"What is called ‘suitable for children’ simply refers to a story where good and evil are clearly defined. I believe that if there is a Warrior of Justice before my eyes who needs my support, as long as I can be of help to him, I am willing to shout as loud as necessary."

"I see."

"A voice is merely a voice, and more direct support is still needed, but everything must start from words. Calling out someone's name to cheer for them becomes a tremendous source of strength for them. I believe both adults and children need to remember this."

"Yeah."

That's what Makimoto thought.

People praise with their mouths, betray with their expressions, and convey their feelings with silent glances.

But because the person before her couldn't read the mood, he could only express himself with words and listen with his ears.

And that was why he valued words more than anyone else.

That clumsy yet honest personality, with a touch of stubbornness, was what made Kumon Katsuki who he was.

"In any case, this was a novel experience. Thank you."

"Y-you're welcome."

"Where shall we go next?"

"Eh? I'm to decide?"

"Makimoto-san knows more about dates than I do, right? Therefore, I believe it is more appropriate to seek your opinion now."

"Mm... usually the first date is led by the man."

"I see."

Kumon furrowed his brows, seemingly thinking as hard as he could.

And the conclusion he reached was something Makimoto could never have imagined.

"Excuse me."

Kumon called out to a janitor who happened to be passing by. Since there were few visitors, there wasn't much trash, but the elderly man still dutifully swept the already clean path.

"Is there something I can help you with?"

His smile carried a sense of hardship and age.

"I presume the primary demographic of this amusement park consists of families and couples..."

"Y-yes."

"If a couple wants to deepen their relationship, which kind of attraction would be most suitable?"

Makimoto, having missed her chance to interrupt, could only stand there awkwardly.

"Well, the roller coaster is a good choice, but personally, I think the Ferris wheel is better."

"The Ferris wheel? Thank you very much."

After bowing to the old man, Kumon turned to Makimoto.

"Hmm. As expected, consulting a professional is the best choice. If there are no objections, let us proceed toward the Ferris wheel."

"O... okay."

Makimoto smiled, silently praying her expression didn't look too stiff.

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"So this is the Ferris wheel?"

Kumon looked up at the structure standing before them. It seemed to have been completed recently, so it wasn't as worn down as the rest of the park.

The Ferris wheel's gondolas slowly rose to the highest point, descended, then rose again, giving off a symbolic feeling of some kind.

If a roller coaster represented dancing on the edge between life and death, then a Ferris wheel represented reincarnation, as if compressing a human lifetime into a limited span of time.

...That was getting a bit off-topic.

"Excuse me, two adult tickets."

Kumon took out his wallet to pay.

"I have something I would like to ask."

"Ah, sure, please go ahead."

The young female attendant nodded.

"Earlier, I asked one of the staff members here... if a couple wants to deepen their relationship..."

Makimoto tugged on Kumon's sleeve, trying to stop him from continuing.

"I heard that the Ferris wheel is a very suitable attraction."

"Well, amusement parks are noisy places, so if you want to spend some quiet time together, choosing somewhere peaceful like this is best."

"I see."

"I recommend the transparent gondola."

"Thank you very much for your help."

After thanking her, Kumon took the tickets from her hand.

"Now then, Makimoto-san, what was it you wanted to tell me?"

"Um... never mind, it's nothing now."

"That is fine, then, but it still makes me curious."

"Actually... I just felt embarrassment."

"Why?"

"Because the question you asked was too direct..."

"I see, did I ruin the mood? However, as service industry professionals, they are trained to process direct inquiries without bias."

"I'm the one who feels embarrassed!"

"Why?"

"Because you said... we're a couple."

"Aren't we supposed to be acting as a couple today? And you said earlier: ‘couples in love only have eyes for each other, they pay no mind to their surroundings or other people’."

"We're the kind of couple who just started dating, so we still do care about those things!"

"I see. Then let's proceed accordingly."

As the name implied, the ceiling and floor of the transparent gondola were transparent, providing a very vast field of vision.

Incidentally, the seats were opaque, so there was no risk of being peeked at.

"Now, we have boarded the Ferris wheel. Next, we just spend some quiet time together, right?"

"I... I guess so?"

"Specifically, how do we spend it?"

"J-just... look at the scenery, talk a little..."

"And what are those curtains for?"

Kumon tugged at the curtains hanging beside the window.

"Th-that's..."

"Hmm, let me try to deduce. These curtains serve to obstruct external observation. Given the demographic of the Ferris wheel

passengers, they were likely installed to facilitate privacy for whatever activities a couple might engage in within the gondola."

Makimoto's mouth opened and closed like a goldfish, and even her ears turned bright red.

Then the next moment made her cry out in shock.

"Kumon-kun, what are you doing!"

"As you can see, I am closing the curtains."

"Why!"

"Aren't we a couple? And these curtains were designed for couples."

Such flawless logic. Kumon answered with a look full of accomplishment.

"W-well, that's true, but..."

Forget it, just go with the flow, Makimoto thought.

Once the curtains were drawn, the gondola became dim.

"Are there any other things that couples do? I am not familiar with this, so I hope you can provide some suggestions."

Kumon leaned closer as he asked.

After finally managing to push all the distracting thoughts out of her mind, Makimoto stammered:

"W-well... couples chat..."

"Is that so? What kind of topics?"

"Anything related to the other person, I guess..."

"In that case, I..."

Makimoto held her breath, waiting for Kumon's next words.

"I want to know about your older sister, Makimoto-san."

"Fuyu-nee!?"

"Correct. From what you described earlier, she seems like quite an interesting person. Additionally, I can learn all sorts of things about your childhood."

"Uh... mm."

"Of course, I have no intention of invading anyone's privacy. If you do not want to talk about it, do not force yourself."

"N-no, it's fine. Fuyu-nee, she..."

Makimoto closed her eyes and began recalling memories of her sister.

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As far back as I can remember, I was always looking up at Fuyu-nee. That was only natural—we were five years apart, and she had always been tall to begin with.

Not long after I was born, our mother passed away from illness.

Meanwhile, my father, who had been caring for her, was completely worn down. The enormous medical bills and losing his job became his greatest burdens. Now that I'm older, I can somewhat understand how he must have felt back then.

But to the me of that time, the word ‘father’ was synonymous with ‘someone frightening.’

"Maybe that's why... I longed for the happy families, the kind you see in picture books."

"I see. But what does that have to do with your sister, Makimoto-san?"

Because the one who protected me from that ‘someone frightening’... was Fuyu-nee.

"Once, my father tore up my picture book right in front of me. I think that was the first time I ever saw my sister truly angry."

I was only five then; Fuyu-nee was ten.

The picture book was about a family of dolphins where a little dolphin got lost. It met all kinds of sea creatures along the way, and

finally reunited with its family.

I was very fixated on the ‘mother’ in the story, so I asked my father why our family didn't have a ‘mother.’

To him, that must have been a cruel question.

He snatched the book from my hands—the sound of the pages tearing still lingers in my ears—and all I could do as a child was burst into tears.

My sister, witnessing this scene...

Got really angry.

She raised her fist and swung it at our father with all her strength.

Then she hit him, kicked him, even rammed him with her head.

Father merely lowered the hand he had already raised and grabbed Onee-san's shoulders to push her away.

Forgetting to cry, I stopped Onee-san as she tried to rush forward again.

Seeing this, Onee-san panted as she gently stroked my head.

"What a strong person."

"Strong... I suppose you could say that. She always played with the boys, never acted like a typical girl. Besides baseball and soccer, she loved hero shows too. I always admired her."

"Admired?"

"Yeah. I wanted to grow up to be someone like her."

"Hmm. It seems you have failed."

"W-wait, that's too harsh!"

Makimoto shot to her feet inside the cramped gondola.

"Judging from your behavior, Makimoto-san, you don't strike me as someone who would play baseball or soccer with boys. Also that would fall under what people generally describe as being feminine... though my understanding may be imperfect."

"I-I guess that's true."

Makimoto let out a wry smile.

"How should I put it... I want to be someone who stands up for others, someone who does what they can. Even if I can't charge forward like my sister did... there’s more than one way to do things."

"I understand. In that case, you and your sister are very much alike."

Seeing Kumon's sincere eyes and hearing his earnest words, Makimoto felt herself being drawn to him even more.

She hurried to change the subject.

"Then, it's your turn to tell me about Megumi-chan."

"That's fine... but it seems we're running out of time."

Through the gap in the curtains, they could see the gondola is nearing the ground.

"Is there anything else couples usually do here?"

"Kiss."

She said it.

It slipped out before she could stop herself.

Makimoto turned bright red and covered her face with both hands.

"I-I was just giving a general example! It's not like I actually want to kiss you, Kumon-kun..."

"What you said is indeed a possible scenario, and it happens to fit the current situation."

Kumon leaned in again. She knew this was his habit when he spoke seriously, but being alone with him in such a small space made her imagination run wild.

"Megumi also said that kissing is something only couples do."

"Y-yeah..."

Makimoto nodded and immediately realized she had dug her own grave.

"Of course, I do not intend to force you. I am merely asking for reference."

Just as Kumon was about to sit back down, Makimoto grabbed his hand.

"Kumon-kun... do you like me?"

She drew courage from the warmth of his hand.

"As I stated previously, in terms of interpersonal relationships, I hold a favorable impression of you. However, at this stage, it still does not involve romantic affection."

"Close your eyes."

"Hmm? Very well."

Makimoto took a deep breath, bracing herself as if for death.

My lips were just about to overlap with his.

I closed my eyes, adjusted the angle of my face, and leaned forward a little.

With his eyes shut, Katsuki's face looked so pure, so heartbreakingly gentle. I stared for a moment before I finally snapped out of it.

There was barely any distance left between us, yet it still felt impossibly far.

Just a little more.

Something hot throbbed in my chest.

That little jolt pushed my hesitant body forward.

A soft sensation brushed against my lips.

Startled, he tried to pull back, but I cupped his cheeks in my hands, keeping him from escaping.

Maybe as a form of protest, Katsuki opened his mouth. The reason wasn't quite the same, but I opened mine as well.

Our saliva mixed between our mouths.

It was only lips and tongues touching, yet that exquisite feeling spread through my whole body.

I couldn't believe I was violating Katsuki's lips, sucking on his

tongue, swallowing his saliva.

Katsuki began to struggle. With those thick wrists of his, he could have pushed me away with the slightest effort—but he didn’t.

Why didn't he push me away? I told myself it must be because he's so kind.

The thought made my heart clench again, and made me like Katsuki even more.

So, I let go of him.

We both drew in deep breaths.

Kumon, who had obediently kept his eyes shut the whole time, blinked two or three times and said:

"I cannot comprehend the action you just took."

"I like you, Kumon-kun. But you don't feel the same way about me, so that kiss was entirely one-sided. You didn't do anything wrong."

"I see. That is a very logical explanation."

"I was just copying the way you talk. Does that explanation work for you?"

"It is perfectly clear."

Then Kumon gave me a bewildered look and said:

"What a strange sensation. Hmm... perhaps the emotion called ‘love’ has some significance after all."

Seeing his expression, I couldn't help but laugh. In that tiny enclosed space, the two of us looked at each other and smiled.

It didn't last long, but until the gondola we were riding in reached the ground and the staff knocked on the door...

I truly felt happy.

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"Makimoto-san, your face has been red this whole time."

"D-don't worry, I'm fine."

"I'm not so sure. It might be related to your earlier discomfort."

"Eh? It's not that..."

As I spoke, my steps suddenly faltered. It felt as though my very body was yearning for Kumon-kun's support.

"Hm. You don't seem to be in good condition. You should head home first."

"Mm... alright."

"And with that serial killer case still ongoing, it would be safer if I walked you home."

"Thank you. But it's still early, nothing will happen."

"Makimoto-san, you're in my care right now. There's no need to be so reserved. So, would you like me to walk you home?"

...Please walk me home.

She wanted to say it—but in the end, she couldn't.

"No, it's fine. There's something I want to think about alone."

"Is that so. Understood."

Kumon nodded.

"Then may I accompany you for a part of the way?"

"Of course."

Makimoto nodded happily.

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"Onii-san, welcome back."

As soon as Kumon opened the door, Megumi ran out to greet him.

"You're back pretty early."

"Yes, because I did not go to school."

"Why not?"

"Because Makimoto-san invited me to the amusement park."

"O-oh, I see."

Kumon went up to the second floor and headed toward his room.

"S-so what did you two do?"

"We were researching various aspects of romance."

Kumon said this as he opened the door to his room.

Just as he was about to step inside, Megumi reached out and grabbed tightly onto his uniform.

"Could you please let go of me?"

"Before I do, Onii-san... would you be so kind as to explain what you mean by ‘various aspects of romance’?"

From Megumi's smiling face, a sharp aura radiated out—one that even Kumon could sense.

Kumon Katsuki's room had no unnecessary furniture, only a desk and a bed.

The two of them sat side by side on the bed.

"Where should I start?"

"At the beginning."

"That will take a long time."

"Try telling it anyway."

"The fundamental laws of thermodynamics dictate that while the sun's entropy increases, the Earth functions as an open system, allowing for a localized decrease in entropy. This energy gradient drives all biological evolution and social complexity..."

Megumi stared at me, then took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

This is called deep breathing; I have heard it has the effect of suppressing heightened emotions.

"Did my words upset you?"

"No, I just asked the wrong question. I want to ask about Makimoto-san, Onii-san."

"I see. You should have said that from the start."

"Mm, I guess so."

"Makimoto-san is the Class Rep of our class, and besides Mineyuki, she is one of the few people in class who initiates contact with me."

"So she's Onii-san's friend."

"That's right."

"Why did she invite Onii-san out today?"

I told Megumi everything—how Makimoto's face had been bright red that morning, how I wanted to walk her home but ended up going to the amusement park instead.

But the moment I mentioned the part about "simulating romance," Megumi's attitude changed drastically. Specifically, she clenched the fists resting on her knees, grinding her teeth.

"Makimoto-san said she likes Onii-san..."

"Yes, she said she harbors romantic feelings for me."

"And how did Onii-san answer her?"

"I said I was unable to understand what romance is."

"And then?"

"After we boarded the Ferris wheel, we began to chat and simulated a part of romance... kissing..."

"Eh?"

"She told me to close my eyes, so I did as she said, and then she kissed me."

"Afterward, Makimoto-san's face grew redder and redder. I judged that her physical condition was poor and wanted to walk her home, but she refused me."

Megumi suddenly closed her eyes and began counting, as if trying to concentrate her spirit.

"Onii-san, did you properly reject Makimoto-san?"

"Reject? Reject what?"

"Onii-san, this kind of situation is generally called a confession. If someone confesses to you, you either accept it or clearly reject them."

"Accept what?"

"Um... about dating from now on, the relationship between the two of you... that kind of thing..."

"I see, so that is what it means."

"That's exactly what it means."

There are many rules in this world that one doesn't know, rules unwritten yet understood by everyone—that is what people call the "mood".

Kumon had long grown used to such things, so he believed what Megumi said.

"Hmm. I indeed have no memory of clearly refusing her."

"Makimoto-san is so pitiful..."

"Is she?"

In Kumon's eyes, Makimoto did not look pitiful at all; on the contrary, she seemed quite happy.

However, the power of the mood to convey meaning is often far-reaching. Perhaps Megumi saw a mood that he had failed to perceive.

Even if it was unintentional, the fact remained that he had hurt her feelings. Therefore, he needed to make amends.

"What should I do?"

"You should go see her right away and apologize, of course"

"Can I not say it over the phone?"

"I think something like this is better said face to face."

"Understood. So to summarize, I just need to take Makimoto-san's request to form a romantic relationship and formally refuse it with clear and concrete reasoning. Is that correct?"

"Mm... s-something like that, but..."

"But what?"

"Just... um... try to be gentle."

"What counts as gentle?"

Megumi thought for a moment, then showed a faint smile.

"After all, Onii-san is Onii-san. You should just say what you want to say."

"I understand. I will do that."

"Take care."

Even though she said that, Megumi still refused to let go of Kumon for quite a while.

Chapter Four

- 1 -

Kumon Katsuki was often told he lacked "common sense," that he was a stranger to being "ordinary," and that he would do "strange things" without so much as a change in expression.

But to him, all of that was simply part of "everyday life" and "reality". Even if he grew weary of it in the future, this kind of "everyday life" and "reality" would likely repeat for the rest of his life.

And yet, that "everyday life" and "reality" had been completely shattered.

A deranged, self-destructive type serial killer.

If he weren't in this situation, Kumon Katsuki would probably be delighted that his deduction had hit the mark. And "this situation" meant the danger of being chased by that serial killer.

There was no time to look back. The sky was dim, and he couldn't make out the killer's details, but...

What was chasing him was clearly a fish standing upright.

Just a few minutes earlier, Kumon Katsuki had checked an address in his contacts, and on the way to Makimoto's place, he saw a strange silhouette.

It was a street without streetlights.

From afar, it looked like a man tending to a drunk collapsed on the ground. But the closer Kumon got, the more wrong it felt. Whether it was curiosity or something else, he didn't stop walking.

The thing standing there wasn't human. It had a streamlined body, a fish-like head, and tentacles shaped like wrists.

Kumon glanced at the person lying on the ground and realized the man's whole body was stained red-black with blood. But calling that a person didn't feel right either—the shape was wrong, pieces missing everywhere. The fishman twitched, and a small skin-colored ball was kicked a few steps toward Kumon.

It had nails and fingers—a clenched fist.

The moment Kumon Katsuki understood what he was seeing, he clutched his stomach and began to vomit. His breathing turned ragged, his nose and mouth refusing to work properly for a while. When he finally managed to breathe again, he lifted his head.

The fishman was looking straight at him.

Its lidless pupils stared at him without blinking.

Kumon immediately turned and ran. Behind him came the sound of a tail fin dragging along the ground, and something like the flapping of a fan—probably the creature breathing through its gills.

Even in fear and confusion, Kumon didn't lose his rationality.

My theory was correct after all.

"That" is indeed an anomalous existence; it is only natural that the police investigation yielded no results.

Fortunately, the fishman wasn't fast. For now, it hadn't caught up to him.

But there was still one problem.

If this were an enemy one could escape just by running, there should have been eyewitnesses long ago.

Another issue was its eating habits.

There were many carnivorous fish species. Whether the fishman counted as a fish or not, the amount it ate was far too abnormal.

He couldn't be certain, but could a single fishman really eat that many people at once? Considering stomach capacity and the time needed to consume that many bodies, it didn't add up.

Putting all the conditions together, the conclusion was...

Seeing more black shadows appear before him, Kumon once again felt satisfied with his deductive ability.

A large group of fishmen blocked his path, letting out low growls as they slowly approached.

A tentacle lashed out, and Kumon was yanked off his feet.

A loud explosion rang out. A utility pole snapped in half, and the severed wires spat blue sparks.

The fishman had thrown something—if Kumon hadn't fallen at that moment, he would have been hit. Kumon realized this about two seconds later.

He looked down and saw a red arm gripping his ankle. It must have been the one who saved him by pulling him down.

Following the direction of the stretched-out arm, he saw a figure standing there—a red humanoid shape covered in needle-like protrusions, wearing a white mask, standing beside the broken pole.

—The arm and the humanoid were connected.

It took Kumon a moment to understand that the hand grabbing his ankle belonged to that distant figure.

The figure shortened its arm, pulled its body closer, and advanced along the ground like rubber, finally standing before him.

The figure's stature was smaller than he expected—it was clearly a female form.

A distant sound echoed, like a cow's low bellow.

The fury of the fishmen.

No—they were afraid.

They feared this deep crimson figure.

Only ten meters separated them.

The wires flashed with a burst of intense light, and the scene was illuminated in blue.

The woman lashed her arm like a whip, extending it far beyond the reach of sight.

When the light faded, darkness returned. He could barely make out the fishmen's silhouettes—and three heads rolling on the ground.

Silence fell.

A few seconds later, furious screams erupted from the darkness—the fishmen realizing their companions had been slaughtered.

The crimson figure stepped in front of Kumon as if to shield him.

The fishmen swung their tentacles, firing projectiles. The crimson figure transformed her arms into shields, blocking every high-speed shot.

The air grew humid, and a few droplets landed on Kumon's forehead.

The fishmen must have been shooting water bullets.

"You are..."

His savior ignored his question.

The shield-like arms transformed once more. Her elbows split into five radial blades—to put it simply, they looked like electric fans.

The elbows began to spin, gradually increasing in speed. The gentle breeze became a violent gale in the blink of an eye, slowing the water bullets.

—The water bullets were blown back.

Kumon covered his ears. The air pressure felt as if it might rupture his eardrums.

The fishmen pressed shoulder to shoulder, barely managing to keep themselves from being blown away... which also meant they had to stop attacking.

The crimson figure extended her arms again, striking into the group. The five spinning blades kept turning.

Like a giant blender.

Even with his ears covered, Kumon could clearly hear the fishmen's screams, and the sound of flesh and bone being shredded.

It wasn't until the noise ceased that Kumon realized he had his eyes squeezed shut.

He slowly opened them.

The crimson figure—that white mask—was looking at him.

Kumon wasn't good at sensing the mood, nor could he interpret subtle body language.

If someone had something to say, they should say it with their mouth (or in writing). That was his belief.

But even an ordinary person wouldn't be able to read anything from that swaying red silhouette and expressionless white mask.

Yet for some reason, Kumon felt she was hesitating.

"I see..."

He tried to speak, but his throat was so dry he had to cough a few times before continuing.

"If the culprits behind this whole series of incidents are these fishmen..."

"And you are the individual responsible for handling such matters..."

"Yet you did not attempt to conceal the combat process..."

"Then it is logical to assume you control information to prevent it from leaking."

"In such a scenario, to deal with a witness like me..."

The crimson figure swayed again. Kumon sped up his speech; he at least wanted to finish what he had to say before things ended.

"There are several methods you could use, such as elimination, brainwashing, or persuasion."

"The most efficient method... would naturally be elimination. It would simply be adding one more corpse, after all."

The white mask swayed a few more times.

Was she hesitating? Or feeling guilty? Maybe that was just his optimism—or his wishful thinking—Kumon Katsuki thought to himself.

At that moment, the mask jerked, then began to wobble incessantly like the head of a doll.

—Gunshots?

Deafening gunshots rang out from behind. The second and third shots struck the mask, causing the crimson figure's head jerk violently from side to side.

"Close your eyes."

A pair of soft, slender hands covered Kumon's eyes and ears.

The world was swallowed by a blast of sound and white light.

"Now we run."

The next moment, Kumon Katsuki was hoisted up by a pair of strong, feminine arms.

It took dozens of seconds for his consciousness, or rather his ability to think, to return to normal.

The first thing that surfaced in his mind was...

...a flash grenade.

He'd heard of them before—weapons that used sound and light to immobilize opponents.

Then he noticed the slender arms holding him, and the soft sensation of the woman's chest. She was carrying him.

Her running strides were small, but incredibly fast.

"I am fine now. I can walk on my own."

"Is that so? Then walk."

She suddenly let go, and Kumon stumbled forward several steps before regaining balance.

"Anything you wish to say to me?"

Before him stood a lavishly dressed woman—a red coat, red hair, and a gun in her hand.

The gaze from behind her glasses felt as if she were appraising the meat on his bones.

"Who are you?"

"You're truly a man lacking in etiquette and elegance, Kumon Katsuki."

"Why do you know my name?"

"Before asking me questions, shouldn't you say something else first?"

Kumon thought for a moment.

For someone who couldn't read the mood, this "something he should say" was usually a difficult puzzle.

But in this case, it could be deduced through logic.

"Thank you for saving me. That should be correct, right?"

"Exactly."

"Hmm... I was just attacked by that group of fishmen, and that crimson figure with the white mask saved me. But there's no direct evidence she intended to fight for my sake."

"And?"

"Therefore, even though I was no longer in immediate danger, the potential threat remained. So I'm grateful for your help just now."

"It's a bit early to treat it as something in the past."

"Huh?"

The manhole cover before them rattled and lifted. It rolled aside as several tentacles slowly reached out. Before the fishmen could poke their heads out...

The woman moved first.

She swung a black longsword drawn from nowhere, severing the tentacles one by one and kicking the fishman back into the sewer.

Then she pulled something out from her coat... things that were likely called grenades. She pulled the pin and tossed five or six of them into the sewer.

She fired two or three shots downward, waited exactly three seconds, then stepped back.

As soon as she retreated, a pillar of flame shot straight up from the sewer opening.

Fortunately, Kumon Katsuki had already anticipated something like this and covered his eyes and ears in advance.

"Ignis."

"Ignis?"

"You asked who I was, didn't you?"

So she was stating her name.

"What are your objectives and your reasoning?"

"It's a long story. For now, I'll just take you back home."

"That is consistent with my next destination."

"Then let's go."

- 2 -

"Kumon Katsuki, are you the type who believes only what you see?"

"If seeing something means it exists, then the world would be full of UFOs. Therefore I reject the assumption that everything appearing before me is always real."

"You really are a man who loves to argue. Well then, what are your thoughts on what you just encountered? Do you think those were all hallucinations?"

"From my personal perspective, I acknowledge their actual existence as one possible explanation, but I'm not committing to it."

"Is that so? Then what about this monster right now?"

Right now?

Before he could speak, Kumon noticed something off.

A round face covered in deep blue scales peeked out from the corner ahead.

Ignis suddenly grabbed his hand.

"Ow!"

A sharp pain stung his palm—Ignis brandished a crescent-shaped short blade in her right hand.

"Watch closely."

The thrown jet-black blade blended into the night. He couldn't see its path or hear it cutting through the air—only the sound of it piercing the fishman.

The fishman let out a low growl.

A cow-like bellow.

Then...

"What's happening?"

Kumon tensed.

The fishman's body began to change. Scales fell off in sheets.

"Did you coat the blade with poison?"

"The opposite."

For a moment, Kumon thought he was imagining it—but the fishman's tentacle was clearly swelling. The one that had been stabbed was changing shape. After a short while, its unbalanced form returned to a new, larger proportion.

The fishman was now so big that Kumon had to look up to see its face.

Even the giant fishman seemed stunned by its own transformation.

Ignis walked past the frozen Kumon.

She drew a sword from her back—its blade just as pitch black—and drove it into the ground with force.

The fishman screamed as the sword pierced its toe, its mouth opening wide in agony.

The sound was like its organs were being churned. Kumon quickly

covered his ears.

Ignis stepped on the sword's guard and leapt upward.

Her right hand moved with the smoothness of a layup, tossing a grenade.

The grenade was swallowed as if the fishman had sucked it in.

Ignis landed, pulled out the sword, turned—the whole sequence took about two seconds—and in the next instant, the fishman erupted in flames.

Ignis noticed a few drops of blood on her coat and couldn't help but click her tongue.

"Understand now?"

The fishman's drastic transformation had begun only after being stabbed by the short sword. If it wasn't poison... then it was medicine.

And what had been on the blade was... Kumon Katsuki's blood.

Meaning...

"I think I roughly understand what you mean."

"Good. That makes things easier."

"However, I did not say I believe you."

"You really are a difficult person."

"I still have many things I want to ask you."

"We're low on time and grenades. Let's move."

She sheathed the sword on her back and started running.

Kumon felt she had a point, so he followed after her.

- 3 -

"There exists another world in this world, a place where beings like the non-humans you just saw and other monsters live. Can you

accept this much?"

"I shall accept that premise for the time being."

"However, they usually hide in the dark."

"Why is that?"

Ignis turned back and shot him a cold look.

"Let me finish first."

Kumon nodded. Indeed, now was not the time to address every single question he had.

"Sometimes they attack and devour humans. They do this because they have no other way to survive."

"Hmm..."

A multitude of questions surfaced in Kumon's mind. Why did these non-humans live in seclusion? Why not make their existence known to the public? Why was eating humans a necessity? And at the most fundamental level, what exactly was the difference between a human and a non-human?

"And Katsuki, your flesh and blood are the highest-grade food to them."

"I see."

"Just one or two drops of your blood caused that reaction. If they were to swallow your flesh, your bones, even your soul... what would they become? That is their goal."

"By ‘their,’ whom do you mean?"

"Everything that stands as your enemy."

"And you, Ignis? Which side do you belong to?"

"I'm the benefactor who saved you from danger, you know."

Ignis said teasingly.

"If what you said just now is true, it is also possible that your purpose in rescuing me is to enjoy me all to yourself later."

"I'm human. A human who hunts monsters."

"So it has to do with a bounty, then?"

Ignis flashed a faint smile.

"More or less."

"I understand. While I lack the necessary data points to verify your integrity, I am willing to establish a temporary strategic partnership for the sake of survival."

"How honest."

"People often say that about me."

Ignis winked playfully at Katsuki, who nodded seriously.

"What was the meaning of that wink just now?"

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

There was that teasing tone again.

"In that case, what is the concrete plan of action?"

"Don't go out at night. They always act under the cover of darkness."

"So is it safe during the day?"

"...Not entirely. But I'll deal with that."

"Hmm. In that case, staying at home might not necessarily be safe either."

"No, that's not the case."

Her voice suddenly turned serious.

"Why?"

"If anything happens, run straight home or to your school."

"On what basis?"

Suddenly, a pair of soft hands firmly cupped Kumon's cheeks. Ignis slowly brought her eyes closer to his, until he could almost feel her breath.

Kumon tried to turn away, but her grip was unexpectedly firm.

"Just trust me!"

Her voice was louder than he expected.

"The volume of one's voice is not a reliable metric for establishing

credibility..."

Kumon was about to say that when an even louder voice called out from behind him.

"Onii-san!"

Kumon turned his head.

Only then did he realize they had already arrived at the boarding house.

Megumi must have been waiting outside for him to return, which was why she ran toward him from the entrance.

"Farewell."

Ignis said that, then turned and left. Before Kumon could call out to her, she had already vanished into the darkness.

Megumi, who had run over at full speed, asked between breaths:

"Who was that person just now?"

"Hmm... just a stranger."

"Onii-san was doing that kind of thing with a stranger?"

In truth, Kumon Katsuki had just run back from a murder scene together with Ignis.

But all Megumi saw was her brother, flushed and breathless...

And him standing under a dim streetlight, face close to that of an unfamiliar woman.

Whenever something involved her brother, Megumi always jumped to conclusions without thinking.

"What do you mean by ‘that kind of thing’?"

Naturally, Kumon had no idea what she was trying to imply.

"...!"

Megumi stomped her foot in frustration, not knowing what to do with herself.

Her sad expression made Kumon's heart ache, so he asked:

"What is it? What has made you so upset?"

Megumi took a deep breath and asked in return:

"...What about Makimoto-san?"

"I haven't met with her yet."

"You clearly went out to meet Makimoto-san, so why did you come back with some strange woman instead!"

"Ah, I see."

Kumon finally understood. Indeed, from Megumi's perspective, this was a very strange development.

"That is because I witnessed a fishman eating someone..."

Megumi's eyes widened, but her expression gradually turned sorrowful.

Kumon Megumi knew very well that her brother never lied or joked about serious matters, so she stood on her tiptoes and placed her hand on his forehead.

"After that, I saw a red, soft-bodied organism..."

Kumon was puzzled by his sister's behavior, and just as he was about to continue his explanation, he noticed Manager-san standing behind Megumi.

At some point, Manager-san had appeared. She raised her index finger to her lips and shook her head.

It was a very clear hint, one that even Kumon could understand.

"...No, I apologize. To put it simply, something very complicated happened."

"I-I see."

Megumi looked up at her brother with worry.

"My, Kumon, welcome back."

Manager-san spoke up at the perfect moment.

"Manager-san, I'm back."

"Megumi-chan has been waiting for you, you know."

"Um, well..."

"Come inside first. It's cold out here, isn't it?"

"A-alright..."

Kumon took Megumi's hand and walked into the boarding house.

"Tonight's dinner is chicken hot pot. Would you two like to eat?"

"I would be honored to accept your hospitality."

Kumon accepted without a moment's hesitation.

"Onii-san, honestly..."

"What is it?"

"Megumi, you don't need to be shy either. Hot pot tastes best when everyone eats together."

"Then... I'll join too."

"Just wait a moment, it'll be ready soon."

Manager-san said, then hurried back to her room.

Only the siblings remained in the hallway.

"Onii-san, be honest. Do you like that woman from before? Is she someone you know?"

"No, I don't know her at all. That was our first meeting."

"Really?"

"Of course."

Megumi finally let out a breath of relief.

"Don't get involved with suspicious people."

"I will try."

"And remember to call Makimoto-san later."

"I will."

"Don't forget. And don't make me worry like this again."

"I will do my best."

"Good. I'm sorry for doubting you, Onii-san."

"Doubting and examining possibilities is the foundation of thinking. You did nothing wrong."

"That's not what I meant, it's just... how should I put it..."

At that moment, the door opened and Manager-san poked her head out.

"What are you two doing? The hot pot is about to boil dry."

"C-coming!"

"That would not be good."

The two of them hurried into the room.

Needless to say, the chicken hot pot made by Manager-san was absolutely delicious.

- 4 -

"Eh... Kumon-kun? What's wrong?"

A sudden phone call at night made Makimoto hesitate for a moment before answering.

"...Therefore, I was requested to clarify whether a romantic relationship exists between myself and Makimoto-san."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

At first, Makimoto had no idea what Kumon was saying. After listening for a while, she finally understood—it seemed today's date had stirred up Megumi-chan.

"Given the current situation, since I expressed refusal, the aforementioned relationship does not exist between us. Do you agree?"

His words were full of logic—clear and direct. That was exactly the kind of Kumon she had fallen for.

So she could only quietly accept those cold, ice-like words.

"Mm, I understand. You don't need to worry. Say hello to Megumi-chan for me. Goodbye."

"Alright, see you tomorrow then."

After hanging up, Makimoto let the forced smile fall from her face.

"Did I just get rejected?"

Makimoto tried saying her thoughts out loud.

At first, she only longed for something ordinary—she just wanted to try what love felt like.

But now, she was truly, deeply drawn to Kumon Katsuki.

Holding back tears, Makimoto repeated his words over and over in her mind.

"'Given the current situation, since I expressed refusal, the aforementioned relationship does not exist between us.'"

Given the current situation.

He said it was the current situation.

Kumon Katsuki never lies.

So even though he rejected her today, the future still held possibilities...

"Alright." Makimoto made a quiet vow to herself.

They say girls in love are invincible, so she still has plenty of chances.

Makimoto Misae was a girl who did not give up easily.

Chapter Five

- 1 -

"Good morning, Mineyuki-kun."

"M-morning."

As always, Mineyuki, who only ever left home at the very last minute, was so startled by the suddenly appearing Class Rep that he took a step back.

The spot where Mineyuki usually ran into Makimoto on the way to school was still further ahead. In other words, Makimoto had been waiting here specifically for him.

And not just that.

Makimoto's eyes were shining, her cheeks flushed, making her look especially cute.

Oh! Has my spring finally arrived? Mineyuki's mind went galloping off into wild fantasies.

"Um... Mineyuki-kun?"

"What is it?"

Although his voice sounded gentle, his choice of words was quite blunt.

"You and Kumon-kun are childhood friends, right?"

An ominous premonition rose in Mineyuki's chest.

"Duh. We've been attached at the hip since we were in diapers."

Trying to dispel that feeling, Mineyuki answered with firm conviction.

"Then could you tell me... what kind of girl Kumon-kun likes?"

"...!"

Mineyuki's face twisted through a series of complicated changes in an instant.

A face on the verge of tears.

A face holding back the pain in his heart.

A man's face, steeling himself to make a decision.

"Makimoto..."

Mineyuki knew all too well that the number of times Kumon Katsuki had stepped on a landmine was equal to the number of times he had stepped in to mediate. No matter how hard he tried, the one who stepped and the one who got stepped on both ended up feeling miserable.

"Yesterday I asked Kumon-kun out on a date. We even kissed, but he said he doesn't have any romantic feelings right now."

She blurted out the entire sequence of events in a single breath.

"I-I see..."

Even Mineyuki couldn't help but waver.

"I know it's just because Kumon-kun speaks too bluntly, so I came to ask if you had any advice..."

Mineyuki frowned.

In truth, Kumon Katsuki was very popular with girls.

He was handsome, smart, and not bad at sports. He gave off an air of refined coolness... as long as he didn't open his mouth.

Up to now, it had mostly been girls who projected fantasies onto Kumon, then had those fantasies shattered once they actually approached him. Or they misunderstood him because of his overly straightforward words and actions.

However.

The girl in front of him was still clearly in love with Kumon Katsuki, despite knowing all too well how he is.

...Maybe these two really are made for each other.

In the life ahead of him, how many girls like this would Kumon Katsuki ever meet? This might be his first, and perhaps his last, chance.

"Listen to me, Makimoto. That guy isn't boyfriend material; he's just a weirdo. Although they're both ‘special’ in a way, the meaning is worlds apart."

"How can you say that about him? Kumon-kun has his good points too."

She was serious; Mineyuki could feel it.

All right then. If that's how it is, Mineyuki, as a man, is ready to take a knife for his friend.

He slapped a hand against his chest, and at that moment...

"Good morning, Mineyuki, Makimoto-san. I am a bit late today."

The man himself made his appearance before them with impeccable timing. Mineyuki hurriedly faked a cough to cover it up.

"Um, Kumon-kun."

"Yes?"

"What kind of girls does Kumon-kun like?"

"By ‘like,’ are you referring to the ‘like’ that constitutes a romantic relationship?"

Makimoto stopped Mineyuki with a look just as he was about to speak, then continued:

"Any kind of ‘like’ is fine, as long as it's the kind that makes you want to always be with that person."

"Hmm..."

Kumon Katsuki contemplated for a moment.

"I possess a low aptitude for prolonged social interaction. I prefer to be alone."

"...Then what about someone you want to go out of your way to see?"

"That is a constant. Regardless of who the person is, there will

inevitably be occasions when I go out of my way to see them."

"Hmm... then what about someone you want to grow closer to?"

Makimoto Misae did not give up so easily. A girl in love doesn't back down.

"The subject is not limited to women; as long as it is someone with a sincere heart for academic research..."

Makimoto nodded. Her grades were already good. It might not be quite the same as "academic research," but with some effort, she could probably manage.

"Also, someone with similar hobbies, or someone trustworthy. This also applies regardless of gender."

"I see. Then what are Kumon-kun's interests?"

"Reading, or more precisely, investigating human psychology through reading. One might describe it as compensating for deficiencies."

A subtle change appeared on Kumon's face. Makimoto decided that must be the faint smile he showed when he was joking.

"I see. So what kind of books do you usually read?"

"That depends on the emotions I wish to explore at the time. For instance, I have recently taken an interest in fear."

"Like horror novels and such?"

"Those are included."

Makimoto hurriedly searched her mind for one or two horror authors.

"Like Stephen King?"

"If I remember correctly, he is a contemporary author, right?"

"Y-yeah, he's still writing now."

"As I am currently engaged in a chronological survey of the genre, it seems I have not yet reached his works. Those I have currently encountered include the works of ‘Howard Phillips Lovecraft’, ‘Robert E. Howard’, ‘Catherine Lucille Moore’, ‘Arthur Machen’. Their books are all quite fascinating."

"Oh..."

The more Kumon talked, the faster he went, and Makimoto could only desperately try to memorize these names she'd never heard before. Also, who was this ‘Arthur Machen’? Wasn't that Asamatsu Ken⊕?

⊕A Japanese author of supernatural fiction whose pen name comes from Arthur Machen, the two names sounding very similar in Japanese.

"Then what are Makimoto-san's interests?"

"Eh? Mine?"

"Yes. I would like to know if we have any areas of shared hobbies. I believe that shared hobbies are conducive to deepening a relationship; conversely, one can use that relationship to mutually expand each other's knowledge."

"Mm..."

Makimoto racked her brain, knowing her face was burning red. She didn't have any particular hobbies, much less anything she was more proficient in than Kumon...

"Hey, Katsuki."

"What is it, Mineyuki?"

"Do you realize what you just said sounds like ‘bring me someone more knowledgeable than I am’?"

"Hmm..."

To Makimoto's eyes, Kumon's profile as he lowered his head in thought looked nothing short of majestic.

"It may sound that way, but as you know, my understanding of common sense is quite impoverished. There are still countless things I do not understand, for example..."

"Eh? Like what?"

"Like Galactic Detective Beowulf."

"Ah! Right."

"D-did you just say Galactic Detective Beowulf?"

An unexpected reaction—Mineyuki's eyes suddenly lit up.

"Yes. I saw a live show at the amusement park before."

"W-was it "Heroes of the Ages Assemble!"? Damn, it's already started?"

Mineyuki looked genuinely regretful.

"If you want to know about Beowulf, just ask me—"

"So I just have to ask Mineyuki?"

In that instant, the mood froze. Naturally, Kumon Katsuki didn't notice. It was the result of Mineyuki and Makimoto's gazes clashing in midair for a split second.

"N-nah, I only know the basics—just the surface-level stuff, really."

"Hmm... then I guess that won't work."

"I-I'm actually pretty familiar with it."

Makimoto spoke up with a burn-the-bridges kind of resolve.

"Really?"

Kumon nodded with complete seriousness.

"In that case, let us suspend the research related to fear for now. The next topic is hope and aspiration. If we are to study the history of this field, early works include..."

"N-no need to start with early works, right?"

"Is that so?"

"If you want to understand how modern people think, I think it's better to start with recent works."

Kumon's eyes widened in sudden realization.

"That does make sense."

"Right? Like hero shows are good—for example, B-Beowulf and the like."

"Hey, you two realize you're about to be late, right?"

This time, Mineyuki stepped in to save them.

"Ah, if we don't hurry..."

"Let's go."

When the three of them reached the school gate, they were exactly one minute away from being late. As Makimoto listened to Father Mercuriali's lecture, she basked in the happiness of having spent that time with Kumon.

- 2 -

"W-what do I do..."

Second period break. Location: The Hallway.

Makimoto was pouring her heart out to Mineyuki. He felt a little flutter, but for his friend's sake, he could only hand the chance over...

"T-the truth is, I don't really watch these kinds of shows at all..."

"Do you have a DVD player at home?"

"I-I do..."

"Then I'll lend you my DVD box set, and you can take the guidebook too."

"Thank you so much."

"It's nothing. This is for Katsuki's sake too. A girl who can talk with that guy like you do? That's once in a lifetime."

Mineyuki clapped his hands once.

"Take care of that guy."

"Y-yeah, thank you."

Makimoto answered quietly, then took a breath and spoke in her usual voice:

"Leave it to me."

She flashed a confident smile that startled Mineyuki. He'd never imagined the Class Rep could smile like that. Maybe this was what you called hope and longing.

After school.

"Hm? Makimoto-san, where are you going?"

"I-I'm going to Mineyuki-kun's house for a bit."

Mineyuki thought that for someone who seemed so capable, Makimoto was surprisingly bad at lying. In that sense, she might actually get along very well with Katsuki.

"Hmm... are the two of you dating?"

"Knock it off already, you idiot!"

Mineyuki punched Kumon.

"Mineyuki-kun, you shouldn't be violent!"

Seeing Makimoto's angry face, like she was trying to protect Kumon, Mineyuki couldn't help but feel the situation was a bit ironic.

"That's right, you are too rough."

"B-but Kumon-kun should also..."

"Should also what?"

Whenever those eyes fixed on her, Makimoto felt herself being drawn in. Even so, she desperately ran through simulated conversations in her head.

Plan 1.

"You should be a bit more aware of the mood."

"A mood is merely a transient mental state or localized emotional climate; lacking quantifiable data or physical substance, it is impossible for me to maintain awareness of something so abstract."

PLAN 1: ABANDONED.

Plan 2.

"You should study human psychology more."

"I often think about human psychology. Therefore, I would like you to perform a detailed and clear analysis of the psychological changes we are experiencing in this current situation."

PLAN 2: ABANDONED.

PLAN 3: EXECUTE.

"N-nothing at all."

"Hmm... in other words, Mineyuki is a man who resorts to violence for no reason."

"T-that's..."

"Hey, Katsuki, suddenly poking around in other people's love lives makes you come off really rude, you know."

"I see. So my question just now was impolite?"

"Exactly."

"Then please accept my apologies. I am sorry, Makimoto-san."

"I-it's fine, you didn't mean any harm."

"Even if there was no ill intent, the fact remains that my speech was inappropriate. An apology is only right."

"By the way, you haven't apologized to me yet, have you?"

"I will apologize for the inappropriate speech, but shouldn't that be balanced out by the punch you gave me?"

"That's called a retort! It's a form of b-body language!"

"Language is meaningless if it does not communicate its intent to the other party. From that perspective, there seems to be a problem with your so-called body language."

"You two, stop fighting."

"He's the one nitpicking everything I say!"

"I am not fighting with him. I am merely pointing out the flaws in Mineyuki's choice of words."

Kumon turned toward Makimoto and said:

"Putting that aside. I fear creating another misunderstanding, so this time I will try to ask in a way that is not rude. Are the two of you..."

""We're not going out.""

The two of them answered in unison.

- 3 -

"That's a really long wall."

Makimoto couldn't help but sigh in admiration.

"It's no big deal. My family's place just has a bit of history."

"Eh?"

"This is Goutou Temple. My house is inside."

"I-I see."

Although she had known for a while that his family lived in a temple, she had not expected it to be this large.

"But my room is pretty far from here."

"I see."

As they walked along the wall, a wooden gate came into view. Beyond it stood a building that was not particularly large—more like a small cottage than a house.

"I'd love to let you watch it here, but you're planning to take it home and stay up all night watching, right?"

"Y-yeah."

"Then wait here a moment."

Mineyuki pushed open the wooden gate. Inside was a stone courtyard covered in gravel, with stepping stones arranged in the center. He opened the small cottage door and went inside.

The sounds of rummaging through boxes and footsteps moving back and forth echoed from within, followed by the loud thud of something falling over.

"Mi-Mineyuki-kun?"

"I'm fine!"

His voice came from inside. Just as Makimoto was growing more and more worried, Mineyuki opened the door and stepped out, carrying a huge shopping bag in his arms.

"W-what just happened?"

"Nothing much... a mountain collapsed, that's all."

Makimoto decided not to ask what kind of mountain had collapsed.

"Um, what's inside this?"

"The complete 51-episode DVD box set of Galactic Detective Beowulf. The rest are photo books, guidebooks, analysis books, best-scene collections, and other related DVDs."

Analysis books... he even had those.

Makimoto shrank back a little. She felt like she'd stepped into what she thought was a shallow puddle, only to discover it was actually a bottomless swamp.

"Can you carry it?"

"I'll try."

"Be careful."

"Nnnnnngh..."

Makimoto gripped the bag with both hands and lifted with all her strength. It was heavy—unbelievably heavy!

She felt as though her arms were about to be stretched out.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I can handle this much weight."

Aside from the DVD box set, the bag was almost entirely filled with paper. A shopping bag stuffed with that much paper was naturally extremely heavy.

"If you say so... just don't push yourself too hard."

"It's fine. Thank you so much."

With no free hand to wave, Makimoto nodded to show her gratitude.

"Do your best!"

Mineyuki turned with a flourish and waved goodbye.

Makimoto nodded at his back and slowly walked away.

With the heavy shopping bag in her arms, she stepped carefully, moving forward little by little.

Even though her home was still quite far away, Makimoto didn't feel tired at all.

- 4 -

Back in her room...

Makimoto checked the contents of the DVD set one by one. 51 episodes... meaning that if each episode was thirty minutes, it would take twenty-five hours to finish. There was no way she could watch it all in a single day.

After quickly skimming the plot summary, she immediately started playing episode one.

—Lift your head, straighten your back. In the depths of your tears burns scorching crimson blood.

Listening to the powerful, nostalgic opening theme, she flipped through the story outline.

Only after reading the analysis book did she learn that Galactic Detective Beowulf was the second entry in the series. Its dense, difficult content had apparently sparked a lot of discussion at the time —an unheroic hero, heartbreaking character deaths, a barrage of bizarre settings, and the final two episodes that remained controversial even today.

She couldn't remember the plot well, but her old impressions of "a

complicated, hard-to-understand story" and "ordinary person who works hard" seemed to have been accurate.

Makimoto watched the DVD intently while reading the analysis book.

By the time she came back to her senses, it was already late at night—staying up any longer would ruin her sleep schedule.

Just as she was about to go to bed, Makimoto froze for a moment.

Thinking back to her original goal...

She just wanted an ordinary romance, to do the kinds of things ordinary high school girls did.

—But staying up all night watching a hero show probably wasn't something a girl in love would do.

Makimoto let out a wry smile.

If the person she liked was Kumon-kun, then an "ordinary romance" was impossible anyway. But a "special romance" sounded pretty nice too.

Her feelings for Kumon-kun were real.

Just as Makimoto drifted into sleep...

Her phone rang.

- 5 -

Human Flare was extremely anxious.

Everything in this world comes down to "compatibility"—or lack thereof.

Wet, dark sewers were the places he hated most, as they bore a striking resemblance to the slums where he used to live.

"This humidity's a real bitch. I can't stand damp places."

A voice with a heavy foreign accent echoed through the sewer.

There was another sound as well—a low, cow-like bellow.

Human Flare's fingertips flashed.

Laser light couldn't be seen with the naked eye, and even from the side the concentrated beam was invisible.

All that could be seen were fishmen-shaped torches; the fishmen flailed their limbs as if dancing before collapsing to the ground with a thud.

And not just one—dozens.

No problem. The order was to annihilate all the fishmen. It seemed to be a command from Ugaya's superior, something about eliminating uncertain factors or whatever.

Countless ice pillars rushed toward him, but that wasn't a problem either. His body had been enhanced with anti-magic modifications, so any ice pillars touching him would simply revert to water.

"Surrender! You fools!"

The attack pattern changed. The fishmen suddenly switched to dousing Human Flare with massive amounts of water, drenching him completely.

A second time, a third time.

Human Flare raised his body temperature, evaporating the water, then countered the advancing wall of water with flames.

Before long, the air was thick with moisture, and the evaporated water turned into dense fog that filled the entire sewer.

The fiery lines shooting from Human Flare's fingertips became visible.

The fog refracted the light, which meant the beam's power was reduced.

And the flood kept pouring out endlessly.

"Holy shit!"

Though it was hard to believe, he was currently losing ground. The mist grew thicker, and the water level kept rising.

What should he do? Run?

But retreat was not permitted.

Flashing white beams, a man wreathed in flames, and charred fishmen corpses smoking black.

The sewer, bathed in firelight, looked like hell.

Human Flare was drenched in sweat. Although he could withstand heat, humidity was another matter entirely.

All he could do was keep firing forward.

—Maybe switching to close combat would be better.

Just as he thought that, something... a shadow darted quickly beneath the water at his feet.

—What was that?

At that moment, a splash erupted in the distance.

The deep crimson humanoid figure looked like a dancing starfish; her limbs traced beautiful movements in the air, and dark blue blood splattered along the trajectory of the red shadow.

Seven fishmen heads fell to the ground along with her silhouette.

"Well, looks like the cavalry's arrived."

A smile tugged at Human Flare's lips. He stopped sniping and focused on defense.

The humanoid figure... Fantastica swung her jointless limbs again and again. With each step she took, fishmen heads, chests, arms, and legs flew in all directions.

The scene was so beautiful it was mesmerizing—or perhaps it was more accurate to call it a dance of overwhelming strength.

Human Flare watched her quietly.

It felt like a long time had passed, but in reality, it was only about five seconds.

When Fantastica finally stopped moving, Human Flare hesitated, unsure what to say to her.

He cleared his throat first.

The mask smeared with dark blue blood turned toward him.

"Thanks, you saved my life there!"

Fantastica turned away without a word and began walking. Human Flare followed behind her.

The two of them rarely interacted.

They were usually locked in the laboratory, only meeting during combat.

But today, Fantastica seemed different from usual.

"Yo. Got anything eating at you lately?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, Human Flare realized how stupid the question was. As lab rats, how could they not have worries?

Besides, when it came to how the scientists "solved" the experimental subjects' so-called "worries," it was always either switching their medication or simply discarding them outright.

Fantastica shook her head, as if trying to fling the blood off her mask.

Perhaps it was his imagination, but right now she looked like she was crying.

After checking the sewer map, Human Flare quickly found the location of the hidden door. It seemed to be covered by some kind of illusion, but it vanished the moment he touched it. He lit his fingertip like a torch and peeked inside.

"Oh fuck! Miss, wait outside for a bit. I'll handle the rest."

Whether it was the walls or the ceiling, green fish eggs covered the entire room. Human Flare could not help but think of the sci-fi movies he had seen before, and almost all of these eggs were rotten.

A pile of white bones lay on the floor. Human? Fishmen? He didn't want to find out.

Suppressing the urge to burn everything to ash, he took out a plastic bag and collected the healthier eggs as samples.

Back in the day, people feared the fishmen that lived in the rivers.

But as the years went by, the rivers were filled in and paved over. The world turned into a concrete jungle, and the fishmen left lurking below, soaked in industrial waste, slowly went mad and began attacking humans.

—Should've just cleared out while they had the chance.

Human Flare grumbled inwardly.

But the fishmen probably had no choice.

They could only watch helplessly as the land passed down by their ancestors was encroached upon by industrial development; who knows how many times such things had happened throughout human history.

War, invasion, devastation—repeating endlessly.

Human Flare shrugged.

"Whatever. Not like I get a vote."

He was just a lab rat. Lab rats didn't need to think.

After putting the healthier eggs and some bones into the plastic bag as samples, Human Flare sighed and burned everything else to ash.

Updrafts from the blaze carried the ash and bone into the air.

All that remained were charred black walls.

"Ok! Come here now."

Human Flare turned to Fantastica.

Fantastica, covered in blood, silently stepped forward.

At the end of the passage, a beautiful lake appeared before them. The walls emitted a faint glow—no need for Human Flare's light anymore.

According to intel, there should be a fishman leader here—a queen ant, so to speak.

If it was stronger than the fishmen from before... his disadvantage against it would only be worse.

"I'm counting on you, Fantastica."

Fantastica nodded wordlessly.

She almost never spoke during combat. Even when he tried to get close to her, he never succeeded; perhaps the dosage of drugs was too high, causing even her personality to be erased, turning her into a mere machine.

If it were not for the effects of the drugs, her personality might... be even gentler than it is now. Among the experimental subjects, Speed Star was like that.

On the other hand...

Being able to stay calm in this kind of hell without relying on drugs meant he wasn't normal either.

Human Flare mocked himself—and at that moment...

The once-still water surface turned red in an instant.

The blood-red water swelled rapidly, forming a sphere the size of a house, which then burst apart.

The splashing water might be poisonous... Human Flare evaporated it with all his strength.

Beside him, Fantastica was trembling slightly.

—Makimoto Misae had very few memories of her older sister, and perhaps because they were few, they were precious. The one she remembered most vividly was going to the aquarium together.

The week my picture book was torn by my father, Fuyu-nee (thinking back now, she probably spent all of her pocket money that time) took me to the aquarium.

The goal, of course, was to see the dolphin show. Thanks to Fuyu-nee securing a spot in the very first row, I could watch the dolphins up close.

The dolphins lined up neatly and then leaped. They also performed acts like swimming while standing upright and jumping through hoops suspended in the air. When it came to the most

anticipated grand leap, the height the dolphins reached was unbelievable, and at the very moment they hit the water...

I was drenched by the splashing water and burst into tears.

I still remember Fuyu-nee's panicked expression, and how she wiped my face with her own equally soaked clothes.

Her flustered reaction was so funny that eventually I could not help but stop crying and laugh.

Even now, I still don't know why I cried back then. Maybe the five-year-old me had something she wanted to express, but the feeling was too immense... I suppose I just cried with all my might.

If I could have put it into words, maybe it would have been "Thank you," or "I'm so happy." If only I could have said it then.

The scene returned to the depths of the sewer—the fishmen's nest.

The massive water sphere floating above the lake had burst.

A giant mermaid appeared from within, her upper body having the appearance of a woman, while her lower body was a fish tail as long as a boat.

The mermaid shed crimson tears. Her arms were wrapped protectively around something as she glared at the two of them. Cradled in her embrace was a crystal-clear egg, and one could see the fetus inside moving its limbs.

In that instant, Fantastica overlapped the mermaid's image with that of Fuyu-nee.

The giant mermaid waved her hand and began to sing. The lake rose with her song, forming five ice pillars that shot toward them.

Human Flare struck down four of them.

The last one struck Fantastica squarely in the chest.

"Hey! Fantastica?"

Fantastica's body also had anti-magic modifications. Even so, the ice pillar was made of water and carried no magic—it was purely

physical.

However, her ultra-soft body could withstand even that. Like now, her body absorbed the impact like rubber and bounced the pillar away.

But it couldn't have been painless.

Why didn't she dodge such a simple attack?

"Are you ok?"

As he spoke, Human Flare noticed her shoulders trembling uncontrollably.

"Flame on!"

With a shout, Human Flare ignited his entire body and immediately put distance between them.

Loss of control.

He had seen it many times—experimental subjects losing control and going berserk due to modifications or brainwashing drugs. Once this happened, the subject would become a weapon of mass destruction for everything in its vicinity, without exception.

Even at a distance, if Fantastica extended her limbs, he would be sliced to pieces instantly.

But contrary to his expectations, Fantastica only trembled. She showed no signs of attacking.

What was flowing out from her mask were... tears?

"Hey! What's wrong with you?"

Just as Human Flare tried to approach her, a deep crimson whip sliced past his nose.

He wasn't hurt—she had held back. Five centimeters closer and half his head would have been gone.

As Human Flare froze, Fantastica suddenly turned and ran.

"No way... Fantastica..."

Human Flare muttered under his breath.

Then he melted all the ice spears the mermaid fired at him.

"HQ? HQ?"

He tried to contact them via radio, but all he heard was static. Of course, this was deep within an underground cavern; the radio would not work. Since that was the case, he could only faithfully carry out his orders.

"The mission is the annihilation of the fishmen and the acquisition of samples. There's nothing about stopping Fantastica."

With a roar, the lake surged upward, and the mermaid rode a massive wave toward him.

"Ok girl! Let's party!"

Human Flare's body erupted in flames as he charged into the very center of the tsunami.

- 6 -

"Human Flare's return confirmed. His vitals are approaching the danger zone."

"Prepare an ambulance immediately. Also, can you patch through the radio?"

Ugaya gave crisp, efficient orders with a smile on her face.

"My adorable Human Flare, how did things go?"

"Doctor, I have some good news and some bad news..."

"Start with the good news."

"Mission complete. Sample collection is finished; the fishmen and the fishman queen have all been eliminated."

"Oh my, well done."

Ugaya's tone sounded like she was praising a pet.

"And the bad news? Is it that you're badly injured?"

"No. Fantastica escaped."

Ugaya froze for a moment.

"What did you just say!?"

Then she screamed hysterically.

"Track her location! Send the recall signal! Why didn't you pursue her?"

"In tight spaces she's far stronger than I am. If I had fought her, I would have lost. So I prioritized completing the mission."

"Human Flare, I know you're very honest, but if you get too naughty, I'll have to send you in for readjustment, you know."

The terrifying words came through the radio.

"Doctor, I simply followed mission priority. Fantastica escaping isn't my fault."

"True enough. But that stiff brain of yours needs to be softened.

I've got a wonderful little cocktail for you. We'll try it later."

"...Is that so... that sounds... cool..."

"What's wrong? Why did you suddenly stop talking?"

"Human Flare has lost consciousness. Likely due to his severe injuries."

"Honestly, what is the emergency team doing? Even if he's a half-finished product, it's still a pain if he breaks!"

"Ugaya."

"Who?!"

She shouted reflexively, then realized her mistake.

"P-president... that just now was..."

"Report the situation. Keep it concise."

The Strass president, Koudaka Shirou, arrived with his bodyguards in tow and gave his order in a quiet voice.

"W-well, um..."

A dozen excuses flashed through her mind, but the president had said to report concisely. The last bit of rationality she had left understood that much.

"Fantastica... has escaped."

"Was it a loss of control?"

"N-No, it was not."

"The cause?"

"I-It was not the fault of our laboratory. We fed her medicine every day and conducted regular counseling. It must have been those idiots in the security division who did something unnecessary..."

Koudaka waved his hand. The bodyguards immediately seized Ugaya's arms, covered her mouth before she could make a sound, and dragged her out of the lab.

"Where is the deputy director?"

"Present."

A man with the kanji "Naka" on his name tag stepped forward.

"The cause is currently unknown."

"What are the viable response options right now?"

"She escaped to the surface, but we're still receiving the signal from her restraint suit. We can still track her location and trigger detonation."

"Is capturing her alive possible?"

"Even if we deploy the company's mobile task force... we would barely be able to hold her back."

"Are there any other experimental subjects available within twenty-four hours?"

"Almost all are currently undergoing adjustment... deploying them immediately would likely cause loss of control."

"'Almost' meaning?"

"Only Human Flare can be deployed, but it will take some time to treat him."

"Then use him. As quickly as possible."

"Yes, sir!"

- 7 -

An ambulance with its siren blaring sped through the night toward a certain location.

A blond man lay collapsed on the ground. His back was covered in wounds, and his right leg was nearly severed.

A group of men in white coats stepped out of the vehicle and quickly lifted him onto a stretcher. When the ambulance's rear doors opened, a bizarre sight was revealed.

A metal tank filled almost the entire interior of the vehicle,

brimming with green liquid. The men carefully lowered the patient into the tank.

The man, who had looked dead moments ago, suddenly began to struggle violently.

But it was a futile effort.

Just before the man could climb out of the tank, a metal shutter slammed shut.

Before long, the sounds of the tank shaking and the banging against the shutter quieted down.

"Anesthesia complete."

The shutter opened again, and the men in white coats attached tubes to Human Flare one by one.

Then they closed the shutter once more.

In addition to the tank, the narrow interior of the vehicle was packed with various equipment.

"Life signs are weak."

"Continue level 4 neural stimulation."

"Confirmed alpha wave increase. Heart rate stable at twenty beats per minute."

"Continue stimulation. Inject four grams of thiotimoline⊕."

⊕Thiotimoline is a fictional compound created by science fiction author Isaac Asimov.

"Beta waves increasing. He is regaining consciousness."

The body inside the tank twitched.

"Good morning, Human Flare."

"Good morning, doctor."

His voice came through the intercom.

"You poor thing. Look at you, all beaten up."

"Can I at least sleep first? I'm kind of dying here."

"Oh no, that won't do. You need to bring Fantastica back."

Human Flare sighed, bubbles rising from his mouth.

"A young girl's heart is very delicate."

"Which is why I want you to bring her back for me."

"I'll try my best, but in my current physical condition..."

"Oh, don't worry. These little injuries, I'll fix them right up."

Ugaya laughed and switched off the intercom.

"Begin ES cell injection at three grams. Increase neural stimulation to level 6. Raise his metabolic rate across the board!"

"But... that could trigger loss of control."

"Just consider it a durability test. We might break a record this time."

Her voice had shed every trace of emotion. In front of an experimental subject, an experimenter possessed nothing but cold, ruthless intent.

The subordinates silently carried out their tasks.

Soon, sounds began coming from inside the tank—not just the boiling of the liquid, but fists... no, an entire body slamming against the tank walls.

But Ugaya paid attention only to the changing numbers on the instruments.

Chapter Six

- 1 -

"Hmm... did Makimoto-san not come to class today?"

It was the break after first period. Kumon Katsuki sat at his desk, muttering to himself.

"What's wrong? You worried about her?"

"Since it is rare to see her absent, yes, I am somewhat concerned."

"I see."

For some reason, Mineyuki looked delighted.

"Are you happy that Makimoto-san is absent?"

"No way. If you're worried about her, why not call and ask?"

"That makes sense. I will give her a call after school."

This time, Mineyuki gave him a meaningful smile.

"What exactly are you so happy about?"

"Nothing. I'm just praying that a certain someone finds happiness."

"Is that so? Well, as long as you are happy."

Kumon Katsuki suspected nothing and continued reading his magazine, "Monthly Tokusatsu Soul – Special Feature: Metal Heroes – Galactic Detectives." The girls were looking at Kumon and whispering among themselves, but the person in question paid them no mind.

Although the school rules did not forbid students from bringing phones, they were required to keep them powered off while on school grounds.

As soon as Kumon Katsuki walked out of the school gates after

classes, he turned on his phone and searched for Makimoto Misae's name in his contact list.

Mineyuki followed behind him with a worried look.

"This is Kumon Katsuki. I am inquiring about the cause of your absence. Please contact me when possible."

"...What are you saying?"

"Since no one answered the call, I had to leave a message."

"No one picked up, huh."

"Perhaps she is currently sleeping."

"Could be."

Mineyuki frowned. The serious Class Rep might very well have stayed up all night watching the DVDs and collapsed into bed afterward... but would she really miss a call from Katsuki because of that?

"Man, that's actually kinda worrying."

"You are only worrying about it now? How heartless."

"Bro, are you really in any position to say that?"

"I have been worried since this morning, thank you very much."

Hearing that, Mineyuki was so surprised he was speechless.

"Is there a problem?"

"Nah. I just figured this'll make a great story someday."

"I concur."

Kumon nodded with complete seriousness.

"Well then, see ya."

"Yes. See you tomorrow."

The two headed home in different directions. Only after Kumon was far away did Mineyuki mutter under his breath:

"Geez... if those two actually hit it off, now that'd be one hell of a story."

- 2 -

"Welcome home, Onii-san."

Just as he stepped into the mansion Kumon saw Megumi rushing out of her room. He had no idea she had been watching from the window the whole time.

"I am back."

"How was school?"

"Hmm... there were no particular abnormalities. Although some parts are slightly aged, there is no necessity for reconstruction."

"What... did... Onii-san... do... at school... today?"

Megumi kept her smile as she asked again. This was nothing new.

"Many things happened."

Megumi took a deep breath, then asked once more with a smile:

"Did anything happen that was different from usual?"

"Every day contains many similar or dissimilar events. If I must identify something unexpected today..."

"Mm?"

"It would be Makimoto-san's absence."

"Eh? You mean Makimoto-san..."

"The same Makimoto-san who kissed me at the amusement park two days ago."

Megumi instantly turned bright red.

"Y-you don't have to say it so directly..."

"I merely selected a memory that would most effectively stimulate your recollection."

Megumi took two deep breaths.

"Onii-san, I remember you called her the night before to apologize, right?"

"I did, thanks to your suggestion."

"What exactly did you say to her then?"

Kumon Katsuki closed his eyes and recalled.

"I said: ‘Given the current situation, since I expressed refusal, the aforementioned relationship does not exist between us. Do you agree?’"

Upon hearing this, Megumi nearly fainted on the spot, but she held herself together—this was still within the range of what she had expected.

"Anyone who heard that would definitely take a day off!"

"I merely clarified our relationship as you instructed."

"Well... in a sense, you're not wrong... but that kind of result is inevitable."

"Is that so? However, she seemed quite energetic yesterday."

"Really? What did she do?"

"She asked me what type of girl I like."

"Hmm..."

Megumi's expression changed as she began imagining things.

She pictured herself returning to England someday, and when she came back to Japan again, she would see Makimoto-san standing by her brother's side.

The two of them looked so perfect together—and yet it was bittersweet, joyful, and painful all at once.

Whatever. Kick first, think later.

"Ow."

"S-sorry."

This time, her brother had done nothing wrong.

"What is the matter?"

"I... I'm just a little uneasy."

"That is not good."

Katsuki bent down and looked Megumi straight in the eyes.

Megumi knew this all too well.

Ever since someone told him, "When speaking to someone, look them in the eyes," he had followed that rule with absolute sincerity.

Even so, Megumi couldn't stop the pounding in her chest. She shouldn't have come back to see him—she cursed herself silently, but the thought vanished immediately.

"I hope Makimoto-san is all right."

"I agree. I left her a message this afternoon. Perhaps she will call soon to let me know she is safe."

"A message?"

"Yes."

"You actually left a message? Since when are you so considerate? What happened?"

"Even if you ask me that, it is difficult to answer. It is mainly due to worry, and Mineyuki's suggestion was also one of the reasons."

"I-I see."

A smile appeared on Megumi's face. So Mineyuki was also joining the fun; she would definitely kick him the next time she saw him.

"That is good."

Her brother's face was serious, but Megumi could see the faint smile hidden beneath it—a smile only she could recognize.

"What is?"

"You are smiling again."

"I-I'm not smiling."

Megumi knew it was a guilty smile, which only made her more flustered.

"I will call one more time later."

"Yes, I think that's best."

Megumi returned to her room, let out a long sigh, buried her face in her pillow, and gently wept.

- 3 -

Kumon Katsuki returned to his room, opened his laptop, and resumed studying.

He browsed online bookstores while reading through the Galactic Detectives reference book.

At the same time, he made a call to Makimoto every hour on the hour, but there was still no answer.

After dinner, just as he was about to go to bed...

Kumon's phone suddenly rang, but just as he was about to answer, the ringing stopped.

A missed call from Makimoto Misae.

Considering she might call again, Kumon waited sixty seconds before calling back.

This time, instead of voicemail... the screen displayed that the phone was out of service range.

Kumon Katsuki thought for a moment, then stood up from his chair.

"Onii-san, where are you going?"

Megumi stood outside his door in her pajamas—she had clearly been listening in.

"I am going to Makimoto-san's house."

"At this hour?"

"I received a call that I cannot ignore."

Katsuki explained the situation to her.

"I see..."

Megumi rubbed her sleepy eyes.

"I might pass her on the way; if Makimoto-san comes here, please

make sure to let her stay."

"I got it..."

"Perhaps letting someone else sleep in your room makes you feel uncomfortable..."

"N-no, that's not it."

Megumi waved her hands frantically.

"Is that so? Good."

Just as Kumon Katsuki was about to go downstairs, he suddenly turned back and asked:

"Then what is the reason?"

"Reason?"

"There are parts of the actions you just took and the emotions you displayed that I find incomprehensible."

Megumi tilted her head, then answered:

"Onii-san, do you know what jealousy means?"

"An unpleasant affective state produced when one's desire for exclusivity is obstructed by a third party, primarily occurring in romantic contexts."

"That's it."

With that, Megumi quickly retreated to her room.

Kumon remained where he was, tilting his head as he attempted to logically deduce the meaning behind her words—and failed.

- 4 -

"How are you feeling?"

The moment that syrupy voice came through the intercom, Human Flare felt nauseous.

All night long, it felt like his organs were being churned, his bones shattered, and his blood vessels clogged with sludge.

He looked down at the leg attached to him and nearly vomited.

That woman had grafted foreign cells below his severed knee, and then proceeded to use scissors and a scalpel to cut away the parts of the leg that were constantly swelling and oozing pus, before throwing them into the furnace to be incinerated.

He thought he was going to die—he wanted to—but he didn't.

The only reason she had done all this to him was because she was in a hurry.

And she still had the nerve to ask how he was feeling.

"Alive. Still in one piece. Mostly."

Human Flare said this while stretching his limbs.

"Well then, be careful on your way out."

"Ok, boss."

Human Flare took a deep breath.

He transformed his entire body into a ball of flame, jetting out hot air.

He shot up from the front courtyard of Strass Pharmaceuticals and into the night sky.

Tracking Fantastica was not difficult—the transmitter in her restraint suit was constantly sending out a signal.

"Human Flare, report your status."

He did a mid-air roll, enjoying the cool night breeze.

"No issues. Estimated arrival in two minutes."

"The mobile unit should already be there."

"What? You're throwing the grunts at Fantastica?"

"It's to keep her occupied. And we can collect data at the same time. I'm so excited."

"Yeah, yeah. Hope you get your precious data."

"Mm!"

His sarcasm seemed completely ineffective on her. Human Flare shrugged and continued flying toward the destination.

- 5 -

As Kumon Katsuki walked along the road, he pondered the reasons for his out-of-the-ordinary behavior.

He truly was worried about Makimoto, but remembering what happened the last time he visited her house made him feel that going out alone this late at night was extremely dangerous.

—Don't go out at night. They always act under the cover of darkness.

He recalled what Ignis had once told him.

As he walked, Kumon called Makimoto with a slight glimmer of hope, but her phone remained out of reach.

Kumon Katsuki was a rational person, but that did not mean he lacked emotion. He simply could not comprehend the subtle emotional fluctuations involved in interpersonal relationships.

—Danger, danger, danger.

When a sense of crisis exceeds a certain threshold, it accelerates a person's imagination: imagining some unknown thing lurking in the dark about to attack, imagining a formless shadow gripping one's shoulder.

Kumon forced himself to suppress the urge to break into a full sprint.

He stopped walking and took a deep breath.

—There is no problem. I can still endure this.

Nothing has happened. I am merely walking down a familiar

street.

It was late at night. Not only were there no cars on the road, there was not a single person in sight.

A suffocating loneliness wrapped around him, as if he were the only person left in the entire city.

—Naturally, it is impossible to judge one's own mental state by oneself. Doing so only creates a version of oneself that judges oneself, which then requires another self to judge that self... leading to an infinite loop. This is known as the Frame Problem⊕ in Artificial Intelligence. As long as the human brain has limited capacity, it cannot detect its own errors, nor can it detect that it is failing to detect its own errors.

⊕A frame is a psychological schema used to interpret the external world, serving as the basis for understanding, identifying, and defining behavioral experiences.

A series of inconclusive inferences raced through his mind.

Kumon slowly took a step forward.

—Calm down. No, the self thinking about needing to calm down actually represents a state where one is unable to be calm. What exactly is the connection between the self commanding the self to be calm and the self being commanded? This is yet another issue of the Frame Problem. The concepts of human consciousness and judgment themselves are mere illusions; this has already been proven.

Just then, an explosion echoed in the distance.

Gunfire, followed by more explosions.

Kumon ran the moment the thought formed.

His feet pounded against the damp asphalt. Makimoto's address had already vanished from his mind.

His only thought now was to escape—to flee from this place.

—But escape to where?

Realizing this, Kumon Katsuki stopped running and gradually slowed to a halt.

His stamina had reached its limit. His heart felt like it was about to burst out of his throat, and the taste of blood filled his mouth.

Kumon adjusted his breathing and counted his heartbeat.

He attempted to regain his composure and rationality.

First, determine his current location—impossible.

During the day he could more or less recognize the area, but now everything was pitch black.

Kumon looked around, found a utility pole nearby, and checked the area number printed on it. Only then did he finally grasp where he was.

Next, determine where he should go.

Up until now, the incidents had all occurred outdoors, so it would be safer to find a building to hide in.

Finally, what he should do now.

Gunfire meant danger. Continuing to stay outside could get him caught up in something. Furthermore, the probability that any of this was related to Makimoto was extremely low.

Ignis had advised him to flee to either his home or the school.

The boarding house was closer—and more importantly, Megumi was there.

Kumon took a deep breath.

He felt that he had finally returned to normal.

He calculated the distance to the boarding house and his remaining stamina, and allocated his strength accordingly.

Once his thoughts were in order, Kumon took the first step back toward his everyday life.

Just then, his ankle was snagged by something.

He was yanked off his feet.

A flesh-colored tentacle stretched out from the roadside gutter and wrapped tightly around his leg.

"Ugh... ah..."

Kumon finally realized that when a person feels true terror, they even forget how to scream. His entire body had gone rigid; he could not move at all.

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Modern warfare involves various doctrines for weapon deployment—considering the situation, the opponent, the desired effect. Weapons are designed according to these various conditions, then produced after evaluating cost and mass-production feasibility.

Yet throughout history, there were times when unbelievable weapons appeared—such as the colossal ritual swords of the mythic age, said to stretch over two meters in length.

Or super-heavy tanks and railway guns that emerged in the gaps between history and war, possessing overwhelming destructive power.

From another perspective, what exactly were these weapons manufactured to fight against? Were they born from human paranoia? Or was it purely wild, unrestrained delusion?

Or perhaps...

Perhaps there truly existed things with teeth capable of biting through 280-millimeter armor plates, and bodies capable of withstanding 55-caliber shells?

Strass Pharmaceuticals was the modern era factory that created such unbelievable weapons.

They specialized in urban combat and covert operations, and possessed combat power far beyond what was needed to fight terrorists.

Firepower strong enough to punch through walls and destroy human bodies—like a massive handgun no human should be able to lift.

Yes—human-exceeding weapons.

Their final evolutionary form was the experimental subjects.

The basic method was to inject "non-human" cells into human cells. Normally this caused rejection, but in extremely rare cases, fusion succeeded.

However, the result was usually a loss of reason, turning the subject into a creature that knows only destruction.

After years of experimentation, they finally created nine experimental subjects usable under limited conditions.

They were called the Numbered—the N-series. Among them, N8 Human Flare and N9 Fantastica were rare subjects with high intelligence, considered highly promising.

"Damn! Did I miss the party?"

Rewind to some ten-odd minutes earlier.

Human Flare muttered to himself as he flew through the air.

Black smoke and flames were scents familiar to him.

He knew this place. It was the Strass Pharmaceuticals dormitory, where experimental subjects stayed when not in the lab. Whether a heavily guarded dormitory could be called a "home" was another matter, but in any case, Fantastica had returned.

—Why come back?

Why return to die after finally managing to escape? However, he would never know that Fantastica had come back only for her phone.

An urban battle had already begun below.

A perfect encirclement—this was originally meant to be a war of

annihilation.

Armored vehicles formed a wall in the residential district, while infantry fired from both sides.

The target at the center remained standing despite the endless barrage of bullets and shells. Human Flare looked down at her and whistled in admiration:

"Fantastic as ever, Fantastica."

He switched radio channels.

"This is Human Flare. Requesting next instructions."

"Oh my, you're already there."

Human Flare cursed internally. Why put a research-obsessed idiot in charge of combat operations?

"We're conducting a little durability test. Just watch for now."

"Ok, doctor."

Human Flare answered energetically, but it was to cover up his own slight sigh.

The more he watched, the stranger it seemed. Armored vehicles, humans, and gunfire—Fantastica should have no trouble breaking through.

Her soft body allowed her to bounce off any bullet, and after that, she could easily break through by simply slicing an armored vehicle in half.

—Is it because she's lost control?

But that didn't seem to be the case.

There was no sign of the lowered intelligence or violent impulses that appeared in unstable experimental subjects.

—In fact, the situation was the opposite.

Every bullet fired from the machine guns was deflected by Fantastica.

But the armored vehicles and the shields held by the infantry were

completely unharmed.

Meaning...

Every bullet she deflected arced behind Fantastica.

Why?

To avoid harming the soldiers.

"Well, that's rare. Guess she's in a good mood."

Human Flare whistled.

If he could break free from the brainwashing—though even thinking that gave him a headache and crushing guilt—he would burn every last person in Strass to ash.

The men fighting down there probably had families. They had no idea what Strass was doing behind the scenes. Even so, she didn't need to protect people who were shooting at her. No wonder she was stuck in such a painful dilemma...

Human Flare remembered a scene from a manga he picked up as a kid—musclebound men in bizarre outfits crying, laughing, and punching each other.

The infantry switched gear. Those carrying metal fuel tanks on their backs unleashed streams of fire.

The air filled with the thick smell of gasoline.

Human-shaped torches blazed brightly in the night.

"Um, doctor?"

"Patience. The durability test is still in progress."

"Yes sir."

The flaming figures began to sway—no, not sway. They pressed their legs together and spun upright on the asphalt like ballet dancers.

Just as the rotation speed began to slow down, a string suddenly appeared. It vibrated once, and Fantastica's rotation sped up again.

Jiiiiiiiiii.

The ultra-thin string produced a sound like a plucked instrument.

The high-speed vibration scattered all the gasoline, creating a

small vacuum that extinguished the flames instantly.

"Fantastica is so amazing!"

That voice was truly irritating.

Meanwhile, the scattered gasoline splashed onto the flamethrower soldiers, turning them into pillars of fire one after another... the flames ignited the fuel tanks on their backs, and the explosions shook even the armored vehicles.

A chain of blasts and shockwaves rippled through the battlefield. A charred corpse rolled to Fantastica's feet.

Calling it a corpse wasn't quite accurate—the man was still alive.

Fantastica changed shape, her body turning liquid as she wrapped tightly around him, smothering the flames.

—Is she trying to save him?

The flames on the man's body went out, but it was too late. His burns covered his entire body; he would not die immediately, but he could not be saved.

Fantastica slowly stood up, the slime reforming into a slumped human shape.

Human Flare felt a pang of sadness. Although he could not betray Strass, he could still sympathize with her for walking such a hopeless path.

The remaining soldiers began to waver.

Though the dosage was far lower than what experimental subjects received, soldiers in anti-nonhuman combat were still given drugs to alter their mental state—but drugs were not cure-all.

The overwhelming difference in power and the collapse of morale meant that simply aiming their guns at Fantastica caused immense psychological pressure.

Fantastica stepped forward through the flames.

The soldiers stepped back.

Human Flare sighed. Were those guys not afraid of pay cuts? Or was the psychological pressure simply too much for them to endure?

Finally, the soldiers broke; one after another, they dropped their guns, turned, and ran for their lives.

Fantastica did not pursue. She simply stood there.

The battlefield fell silent.

"Hey, doctor, is it my turn yet?"

"Wait a bit longer."

"As you wish."

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There was a blazing beast inside Makimoto.

It was the most primal survival instinct, reacting to the killing intent before her and roaring back at it.

She was finally able to suppress this urge; in the past, she had always given up on facing it. If she had been able to face it back then, maybe she could have resolved things without taking lives.

The pain of her torn flesh, the burning pain scorching her body kept stimulating her. She knew that if she rode those waves of pain and let everything loose, she would feel relief... but she still desperately stopped her body from chasing that pleasure.

Makimoto Misae—that was the name she had relied on until now, along with another name engraved in her heart.

—Kumon Katsuki.

Only that person could awaken Makimoto's humanity.

Every time stray bullets and flames hurt someone, her heart felt a piercing pang of guilt.

When she wrapped her arms around the man whose whole body was on fire, touched the blood-seeping skin, and felt his body stop moving, she slowly stood up.

Then she took one step forward, then another, thinking in her heart that every step took her one step closer to Kumon-kun.

The gunfire ceased.

One step, then another.

The men began to retreat.

The commander waved his arm hard, ordering everyone to retreat. The battle had lasted only a few minutes, but he and his subordinates were already exhausted. Give it another ten seconds, and even without orders, the soldiers would have screamed in fear and fled anyway. So he used the last of his rationality to issue the retreat order.

Just then, his foot kicked something.

He turned back.

At his feet was something that shouldn't be here.

A child—a very young child. He covered his ears, eyes tightly shut, body curled up. No wonder; some oversight must have let him slip past the blockade.

He should have immediately eliminated the witness, but the gun in his hand suddenly felt unbearably heavy.

So he reached out his rough hand, trying to gently touch the boy's shoulder.

The next moment, the commander's right hand was sliced into millimeter-sized fragments with absolute precision.

His scream served as a signal. His right hand began to disintegrate, and the commander, collapsing from shock, turned from head to toe into a pile of minced flesh.

Panic instantly swallowed the entire battlefield.

Makimoto was suddenly filled with uncontrollable rage.

N1 Invisible Blade! They actually sent that child!

She knew that child, and wanted to call his name—but she

couldn't.

He had apparently been sold here as an infant. Unlike her, he had lived in the lab since birth, so he had never been given a name.

Most experimental subjects' abilities were discovered only when their survival instincts were threatened. His ability was a simple one: using fear as a medium, he created an invisible wall.

But Ugaya wasn't satisfied. After years of mental torture, his fear had been amplified, turning that wall into a blade that shredded anything touching it.

The soldiers dropped their guns and fled. The armored vehicles sped away without waiting for their comrades to board.

Sounds, sights—everything was feeding the boy's terror.

The razor-sharp space expanded outward from the boy as its center.

"Stop it..."

Makimoto used her vocalizer to produce a low sound, but it only added fuel to the fire.

The ground caved downward, and the falling armored vehicle was crushed from the front.

The massive chunk of metal turning to powder in an instant was far too surreal.

People began to lose their sanity from fear.

A soldier ran with a stiff smile on his face.

The first thing to touch the invisible sphere was the soldier's raised wrist. By the time he felt pain, it was too late—his face was already being sliced into millimeter fragments by the force field.

The second man tried to stop when he saw this, but it was too late. His knee had already entered the field. Only his upper body moved as if swimming, and after one scream, he fell silent forever.

The third man fired at the boy, but that only made the boy expand the field, swallowing the fourth and fifth men in succession.

The battlefield finally fell silent, leaving only the wind and the

distant sound of engines.

Makimoto took a slow step forward, careful not to enter Invisible Blade's line of sight or disturb the air.

She used the cracks in the asphalt to gauge the range and slowly advanced.

At that moment, the ground beside N1 suddenly erupted, and the boy froze in terror.

The asphalt sizzled as it melted.

Makimoto dodged backward just in time and looked up at the sky.

N8 Human Flare—the cheerful man shrugged.

"Orders are orders."

Makimoto felt as if he were saying those words.

Invisible Blade couldn't attack the air.

Human Flare kept firing countless heat lines, forcing N1 toward Makimoto. With the stumbling N1 as the center, the asphalt gradually turned to fine sand.

He kept letting out deep, low moans. Even through the reception of the external microphone, Makimoto knew—that was N1... a child's cry of despair.

Makimoto glared upward. She had worked with Human Flare many times and considered herself familiar with his weaknesses.

She shaped her left hand into a propeller, blowing the sandified asphalt upward, while digging into the road with her right hand.

"Whoa!"

Human Flare dodged the incoming stones.

After avoiding the second and third, flames burst across his whole body as he focused on defense, evaporating the flying asphalt.

"Smart move."

The swirling dust weakened the heat lines and blocked his vision. This time, she had the advantage.

"...shit! N1 is such a damn nuisance."

Just as he flew upward to widen the distance—

An explosion sounded below.

It took Human Flare several seconds to realize what had happened.

When the dust finally cleared...

He saw Fantastica standing in the center of the crater, tightly hugging Invisible Blade.

Invisible Blade's head had been blown off.

"What's wrong? Hurry up and catch her!"

Ugaya urged him.

He was the one who had said "N1 is such a damn nuisance" over the radio. Human Flare buried the regret in his chest and shouted:

"Ok, boss!"

He switched his mic to external output.

"Fantastica!"

The hollow eyes of the white mask looked toward him.

"You get it by now, right? You can't escape. Come back with me already!"

However, all of this was just an act; persuasion was ultimately meaningless.

All experimental subjects had a built-in "insurance"—a tiny bomb implanted in their heads that couldn't be removed even surgically.

And Ugaya was holding the detonator.

In the end, Fantastica had only two choices: return to the organization for complete brainwashing, or die here.

"Why...?"

Her synthetic voice trembled.

"Why... how can you do something like this?"

"You ask why... because we're superheroes. We do the great work of protecting humanity."

The "non-humans" they fought weren't just fishmen. They would continue to be deployed again and again.

"We're guardians. You and me, we're the same, aren't we?"

No—he had long known that neither that woman Ugaya nor President Koudaka Shirou had anything decent in their heads.

But this was the only way he could try to convince Fantastica.

Human Flare extinguished the flames around him and slowly descended.

"Wait, what are you doing?"

"It's communication. You gotta think from the other person's perspective."

In terms of physical strength, Human Flare was far inferior to Fantastica.

The girl before him could take his head off with a single strike.

But...

She couldn't bring herself to attack. Yet if she didn't attack, she couldn't escape.

"Come on, let's go home. Aren't we a family?"

Even he wanted to vomit at his own words.

Fantastica shook her head.

"No matter what, you won't?"

She covered her ears, refusing to listen.

Human Flare lowered his head—and that slowed his reaction.

"Damn it! Stop her, quickly!"

At Ugaya's voice, he snapped his head up.

Fantastica was turning her fingers into thin threads and inserting them into her ears. Her liquefaction ability allowed her to reshape bones and organs freely. If she did that...

Stop her? How?

Fantastica pulled her fingers out of her head before Human Flare

could do anything.

In her blood-soaked palm was the tiny bomb. It exploded with a sharp crack, but an explosion of this magnitude couldn't harm her at all.

"Fantastica... you've gone too far. What are you spacing out for? Grab her already!"

He had no choice. Human Flare lunged to grab her, but it was pointless—she slipped from his hands like an eel.

"Doctor. Next order?"

"Goodness, being this disobedient... you're making me quite upset."

She wasn't listening at all.

"Activate full-body restraints, and forcibly eject armor plates one through ten."

“The hell?!”

The protrusions restraining Fantastica reacted, followed by a series of small explosions. The armor covering her right arm fell away.

A murky-black arm appeared, blood seeping from veins beneath the muscle.

During combat, Fantastica's skin adhered to the armor. But now, with the restraints still active, if the armor was forced to be ejected...

Right shoulder, left shoulder, chest.

Piece by piece, her skin was peeled away.

"Christ..."

The sight forced Human Flare to avert his eyes.

The sounds finally stopped.

He slightly opened his eyes.

It was no longer a human form—no, it couldn't even be called a shape. All that remained were intestines wrapped around bone and internal organs arranged on top.

Screams and the sound of vomiting came through the radio—probably the researchers watching the monitors. Hah. Serves them

right.

"Now you can catch her."

He couldn't disobey Ugaya's orders. That was what made her so detestable. Human Flare fought the urge to vomit and slowly approached Fantastica.

"Relax, she won't die right away like this. I'll patch her up later. What are you so worried about?"

It was the kind of voice that made you want to kill her on the spot, yet it sounded so sweet.

Conflicted, Human Flare slowly approached... that pile of organs.

He shrugged helplessly.

In the end, tomorrow would just be the same damn mess on repeat. Hell of a joke.

As he accepted that dull, lightless sense of despair—

The girl still hadn't given up.

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A woman was watching the chaos from afar.

She couldn't hear the voices through the scope, but she could already grasp the general situation.

"Hmph. Looks like Strass is tearing itself apart."

An empty room in the Strass dormitory was an excellent sniping spot.

She aimed her rifle forward.

Human Flare wasn't as terrifying as expected. His offensive power was excellent, but his defense was no different from a normal human. Catch him off guard and he'd go down.

The problem was Fantastica. Not only could she resist magic, she

was bulletproof and fireproof. She still hadn't found a reliable way to destroy her.

But with this opportunity, aiming for the brain or heart would probably kill her easily.

Ignis thought for a moment, then changed the bullet in her rifle.

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The pile of organs slowly writhed, leaving trails of blood and fluid on the asphalt, crawling forward at the pace of an ant.

For a moment, Human Flare was too stunned to speak.

"Ah..."

The same sound came through the radio.

He spat. Even if she got away, it wouldn't mean a damn thing...

"Amazing... simply wonderful... she can still move!"

Ugaya's excited voice came through the radio.

"Approach her carefully now, alright? I need to harvest every precious bit of data from this performance."

Watching her crawl was unbearable. Just looking hurt. If he could, he wanted to burn everything before him to ash.

But orders were absolute. Human Flare had no choice but to walk forward.

Two steps, three steps.

At that moment, the woman in the distance fired her gun.

The bullet cut through the sky and landed quietly in the very center of the battlefield.

The sudden gunshot froze everyone.

The next moment, the bullet began to spin and spew thick smoke. Soon, everything in sight was swallowed by the smoke.

"What's going on?"

Coughing from the thick smoke, Human Flare forced out:

"Boss! It's all smoke out here!"

"What are you doing? Shoot her already!"

He fired laser after laser toward Fantastica, but the red beams vanished into the smoke. Smoke, like sand, was the natural enemy of lasers—they lost all power.

"Hurry! Hurry!"

With the shrill orders ringing in his ears, Human Flare kept firing into the smoke. The fact that his attacks couldn't hurt her actually made him feel relieved.

Soon, a gust of wind blew the smoke away.

"What's the situation now? Report!"

"Wait a minute"

Human Flare looked down.

There was a trail of blood and bodily fluids on the ground—painful to look at. The trail led into a drainage grate connected to the sewer. The large smear of blood on the grate was probably left when she forced herself through.

Listening to his superior's hysterical screaming, Human Flare quietly laughed. Of course, he didn't let anyone hear it.

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Kumon Katsuki lay sprawled on the asphalt, struggling nonstop.

When he finally managed to force out a sound, he began

screaming at the top of his lungs. His voice echoed through the nighttime street, then faded away.

Viscous, warm bodily fluids kept seeping into his socks.

Kumon tried crawling forward.

"That thing" slid out of the drainage hole.

It looked like a long, twisting pink serpent, with several pouch-like sacs pulsing along its overly long body.

—Too horrifying.

It didn't resemble any creature of this world.

Kumon fought the urge to vomit and stared at the thing.

As it writhed across the asphalt, its pink skin kept oozing blood.

Could something that bled just from moving even be called a living organism?

It was practically like—

A chill ran through Kumon's entire body, and he forced himself to stop thinking any further.

He pressed himself flat against the asphalt and crawled desperately, trying to get as far away from the thing as possible.

No... this couldn't be.

But...

Long tubular structures, deep-red organs pulsing nonstop, peach-pink wing-like shapes.

It was almost like... like—

—the exposed internal organs of a human with the skin peeled off.

As sensation slowly returned to Kumon's hands and feet...

From the front end of that pile of organs, from inside the drainage hole...

A gray lump emerged, with two white spheres connected to the wrinkled brain only by thin fibers, swaying back and forth.

Kumon sucked in a sharp breath.

The grip on his foot weakened. He hurriedly yanked his leg free, scooting backward in a sitting position. The organs crawled toward him, but slower than a toddler learning to walk.

—What? Is it actually weak?

Was it a reaction caused by fear? A wild thought flashed through Kumon's mind.

He stood up and took a deep breath.

If he just lifted his foot and stomped down, he should be able to destroy it.

Kumon brushed aside the intestines clinging to his foot and raised his right foot over the gray brain.

But as he exhaled, he moved his foot away again.

There was no need to go that far. He could just turn around and run—run back to his house, back to that safe place, then sleep and forget everything that had just happened.

Kumon Katsuki slowly turned his back to the grotesque mass of flesh.

Just as he was about to break into a run, the lump of flesh let out a faint sound.

To be continued...

Afterword

Hello everyone, I am Kaihou Norimitsu.

I am the author responsible for the novel adaptation of the Nitroplus work "Jingai Makyou." The original game was made for adult players, but the novel is suitable for readers of all ages, so please feel free to enjoy it.

I have to thank Nitroplus for their full support with the game materials. Thanks to them, I was able to write a completely new story centered around one of the female characters, Makimoto Misae, rather than simply following the plot of the game version of "Jingai Makyou."

Yogatana-san and I have been tied together by fate since junior high. Back then, he already seemed to have cut ties with his family home in Yatouura City, Chiba Prefecture. According to him, he chose to continue his studies simply because he didn't want to inherit the family business. Thanks to that, during junior high and high school he was able to spend every day buried in games with me. He always said he wanted to escape his hometown, and it seems he meant it. After graduating high school, he traveled all the way to Australia for research, only to eventually return to Japan and become a scenario writer for digital novel games. He's someone who has lived a very colorful life.

And because of all that, we naturally poured a great deal of passion into this novel, so much that it far exceeded the scope of the original plan. In the end, it had to be split into two volumes before it could be published. For that, I truly apologize. How will the tangled fate and love between Makimoto and Kumon Katsuki unfold? I hope all of you readers will look forward to the next volume.

Kaihou Norimitsu

Commentary

Speaking of "Jingai Makyou", I have to begin by mentioning Kaihou Norimitsu-san. I first met him back when I was in middle school. He was the kind of person who stood out in class—always saying things that completely ignored the mood in the room. If something interested him, he'd jump into the discussion with full enthusiasm; if it didn't, he'd tune it out entirely. In short, he never looked like someone who would grow up to be an ordinary salaryman. He was also one of the models for Kumon Katsuki.

As expected, he did not become a salaryman. While I was studying abroad in Australia, a book arrived for me—his work as a writer, the game "BEAST BIND ～ Majuu no Kizuna". It was a TRPG you could enjoy with nothing more than dice and paper, something I played during breaks while writing about the ruins of the city of Pnakotus in the Cthulhu Mythos. The experience I gained from playing it later became reference material for creating "Jingai Makyou". Because of all that, the fact that Kaihou-san ended up being the one to novelize my work feels like a rather charming twist of fate.

Since "Jingai Makyou" grew out of a TRPG, it was never meant to be a story with a single ending, but rather a world-view. When I first proposed the project, the number of heroines exceeded ten. But that wasn't because I wanted to create ten different game routes—it was so that even after the game released, the world could remain open to new stories.

And because of that approach, this novel was able to come into existence. As the original creator, that makes me very happy.

"Jingai Makyou" is a work about cross-cultural exchange. In other words, it's a story about humans and non-humans who originally lived without ever interacting, suddenly meeting by chance and struggling to break down the barriers between them.

And as for the game itself, "Jingai Makyou" is a story built from countless encounters.

Looking back, it all began with my encounter with Kaihou-san. Later, Urobuchi-san invited me to join Nitroplus, and there I encountered NIθ-sensei's artwork and the music of ZIZZ Studio. Perhaps it is just my personal delusion, but only because this game was brought to life here—refined and cared for by so many Nitroplus staff members could it become a Nitroplus game—and, at the same time, a game worth playing for all of you.

For the novel version, the illustrations were drawn by Namaniku ATK-sensei, who handled the art for the completed edition, taking the place of the game's original illustrator, NIθ-sensei. I hope everyone enjoys this reborn version of "Jingai Makyou".

It might sound like I'm blowing my own horn since I am the author, but Nitroplus's "Jingai Makyou" is a work I'm truly confident in. If any readers who enjoyed this "Fantastica of Nine" find themselves unable to resist and go check out the game, that would be the greatest honor I could ask for.

Also, I, Yogatana Shirou, am a game scenario writer.

I can't afford to lose to Kaihou Norimitsu. After seeing him write such an entertaining novel, I've come up with all sorts of ideas for creating a game that can stand toe-to-toe with his work.

Although I do not yet know what form it will take, please look forward to it.

Scenario Lead for "Jingai Makyou" ***Yogatana Shirou***

Author Profiles

海法紀光

Kaihou Norimitsu

Living in Yokohama, he is a writer, gamer, and translator who loves American comics, TRPGs, and science fiction. His works include "Ore no Shikabane wo Koete Yuke: Norowareshi Kyoudai no Rondo", the "Shikigami no Shiro" series (all under Famitsu Bunko), as well as many other novel adaptations.

なまにくATK

Namaniku ATK（Nitroplus）

An illustrator employed at Nitroplus Co., Ltd. He worked on coloring for the company's first title, "Phantom of Inferno", and later handled coloring and color supervision for other works. His talents extend far beyond coloring—he has also been involved in mechanical design, game supervision, and more.